

Valor





VALOR

Fairy tales do not inform children that there is such things as monsters. Children already know that there are monsters. What fairy tales really teach is that monsters can be transformed or destroyed.

– Paraphrasing
G.K. Chesterton

Valor. ed. by Isabelle Melançon and Megan Lavey-Heaton
311 pages

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Printed in China

First Printing, 2015

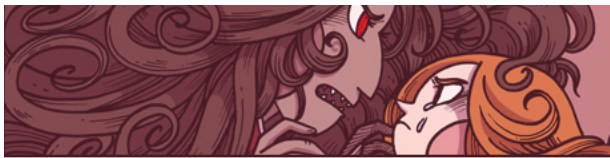
ISBN 978-0-9853-0957-2 (hardback)
ISBN 978-0-9853-0958-9 (paperback)

1. Fairy tales--Adaptations. 2. Folklore--Adaptations. 3. Heroines in literature. 4. Short stories. 5. Graphic novels. I. Title.

GR470.V35 2015
398.2'082--dc23

Fairylogue Press
4173 Grouse Ct. #115
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050

www.fairyloguepress.com



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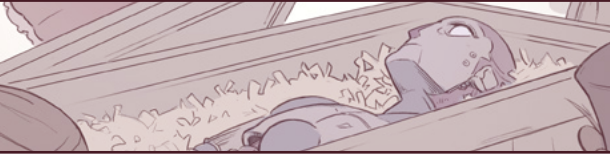
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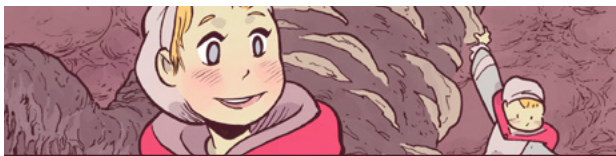
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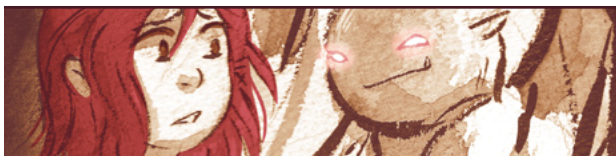


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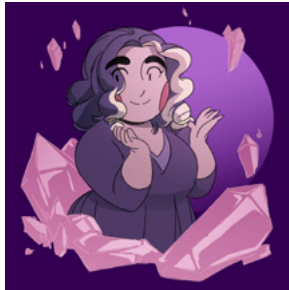
The Creators



ISABELLE MELANÇON is a co-editor of *Valor* and co-creator/artist of *Namesake*. She also is part of the Hiveworks administration team. She lives in Gatineau, Quebec, where she is on the hunt for fairy tales and lemonade worth her time.



MEGAN LAVEY-HEATON is a co-editor of *Valor* and co-creator of *Namesake*. A transplanted Southerner who lives in Pennsylvania, she requires her partners in crime, at least two books at her fingertips, coffee, and a cat on her arm.



JAYD AÏT-KACI is an American-born, French-grown, Canadian-living artist that does too much work and gets too little sleep. Her favorite things include hedgehogs, astrology, and coffee. She can also cook a mean pasta alfredo.



ELENA "YAMINO" BARBARICH is a freelance artist known for her webcomic *Sister Claire*. Her hobbies include voice-acting, dancing in front of the mirror, traveling, posing for pretentious photos, and going on adventures with her wife, Ash.



A colorful, mysterious creature native to North Carolina, **ASH BARNES** writes the Missing Moments for *Sister Claire* and helps plan the comic's story with her wife, Elena "Yamino" Barbarich. Ash can often be spotted building dart frog tanks.



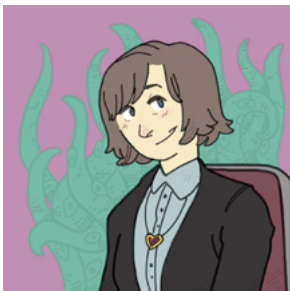
MORGAN BEEM is a Denver, Colo.-based comic artist, who loves all things fairytale, and has a particular soft spot for things a little creepy.



CORY BROWN is the writer and editor of *The End*, a sci-fi-adventure webcomic. When he's not writing or at work, he spends time with his wife, Randi, and helps look after their energetic daughter. He also enjoys writing silly title text.



RAN BROWN is an illustrator with a daughter, who she hopes will one day love this anthology and draw inspiration from it. She devotes most of her time to *The End*, but jumped at the chance to draw something that wasn't a spaceship interior for once.



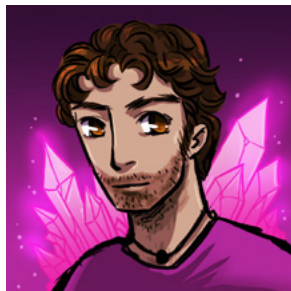
MEAGHAN CARTER is a freelance illustrator and self-published cartoonist. Based out of Toronto, she works in the Comic Book Embassy studio. She is the author behind *Take off!* and *Godslave*.



NICOLE CHARTRAND is a concept artist, illustrator and comic creator from Montreal. She makes art for video games by day, and comics in every other waking moment. You can find her near a game console or the nearest source of coffee.



KADI FEDORUK is the creator of *Blindsprings*. She doesn't sleep, she doesn't leave her house, she may in fact be ... a vampire. Or just a sleep-deprived artist with too many jobs. (but totally a vampire)

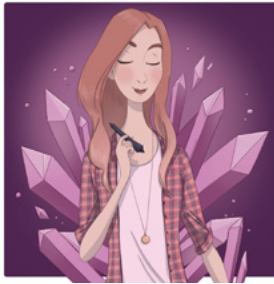


TIM FERRARA is an independent writer and fantasy magic enthusiast. A full time knowledge-seeker, Tim's recent independent work can be found in *Hana Doki Kira*.

The Creators



SARA GOETTER is a cartoonist living in Pennsylvania. She likes to draw stories about girls, monsters, adventure and sometimes monster girls on adventures. When she's not drawing she's playing video games and worrying about her cat.



EMILY HANN is a graduate of traditional animation from Algonquin College. She now works as a background art supervisor on various Disney TV shows. She lives in Ottawa, Ontario, with a man and three rabbits.



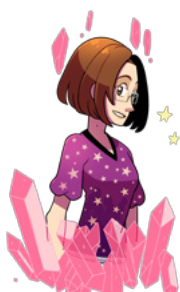
MEGAN KEARNEY is a graduate of Sheridan College's animation program and manager of Comic Book Embassy, a busy co-work studio. She shares her Toronto home with her illustrator husband, a handful of rabbits, and too much laundry.



MICHELLE "MISHA" KRIVANEK, creator of *Alice and the Nightmare*, is a Seattle artist studying animation in New York City. When not working on comics she can be found doodling or smothering her cat.



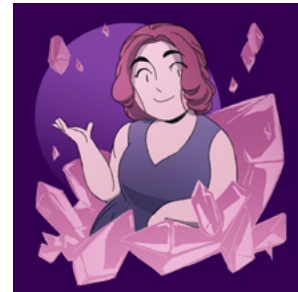
JUSTIN LANJIL is a self-styled artist, illustrator and designer. Wizard wasn't on the job opportunities list so for now there's happiness to be found in making a different kind of magic happen on the pages of comics.



ANGELICA MARIA LOPEZ: Angelica is 2D artist from Canóvanas, Puerto Rico! She's based in Los Angeles and is the artist and writer for *Solstoria*, an all-age comic about a girl who wants to become a knight in order to save her missing brother.



LAURA NEUBERT is an artist, writer, and traveler whose goal is to tell a good story or two. She hopes that you enjoy the one she has contributed to this anthology, and hopes to make many more in the future.



ALEXANDRA SINGER is a part-time writer, full-time editor whose favorite activities include video games, baking, and studying random historical periods for fun. She lives in Connecticut with her two cats, wife, and too many books.



KATIE SHANAHAN is a cartoonist, animator and story artist from Toronto. Collaborating with her brother, Steven, she's drawn comics for the Flight and Explorer anthologies, and the Joe Shuster nominated fantasy-humour series *Silly Kingdom*



STEVEN "SHAGGY" SHANAHAN is a writer of comics, editor of videos, and voicer of voice things. With his sister, Katie, he's made many short comics, as well as their series, *Silly Kingdom*. He can be found mostly on the Internet.



ANNIE STOLL is a freelance graphic designer for folks like Lucasfilm and Art Director at Sony Music by day, Comic Illustrator by night. Also makes a mean pineapple upside-down cake.

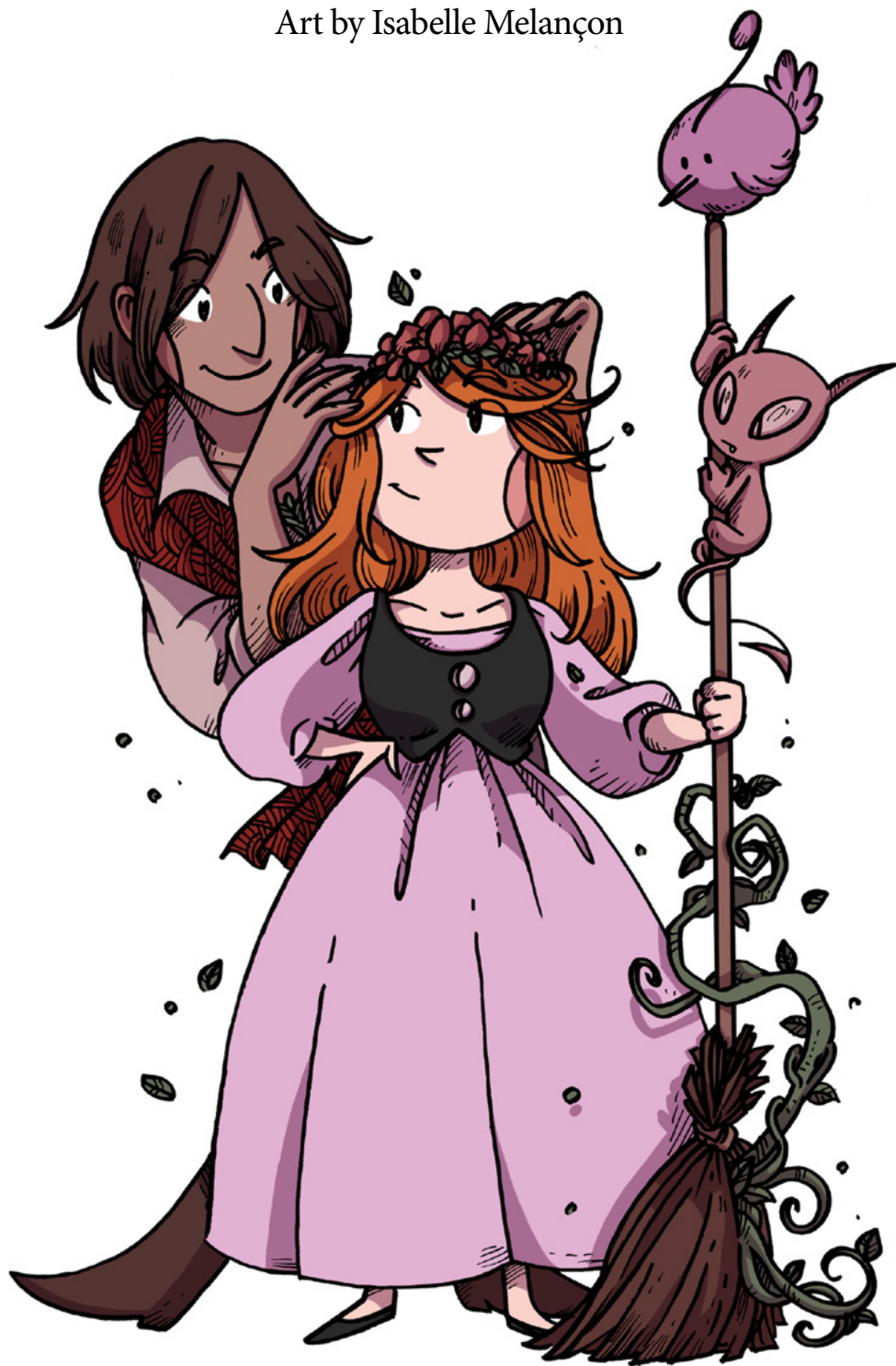


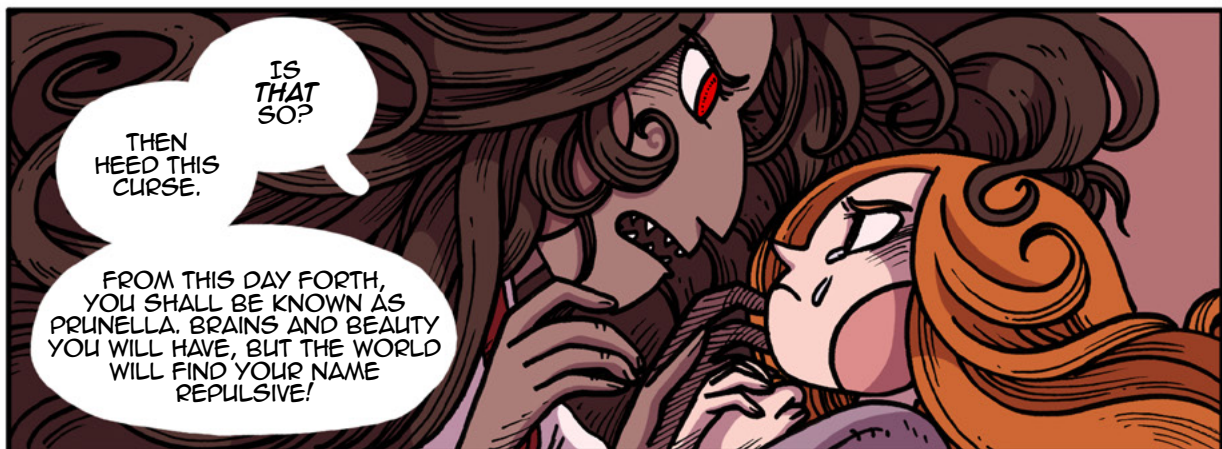
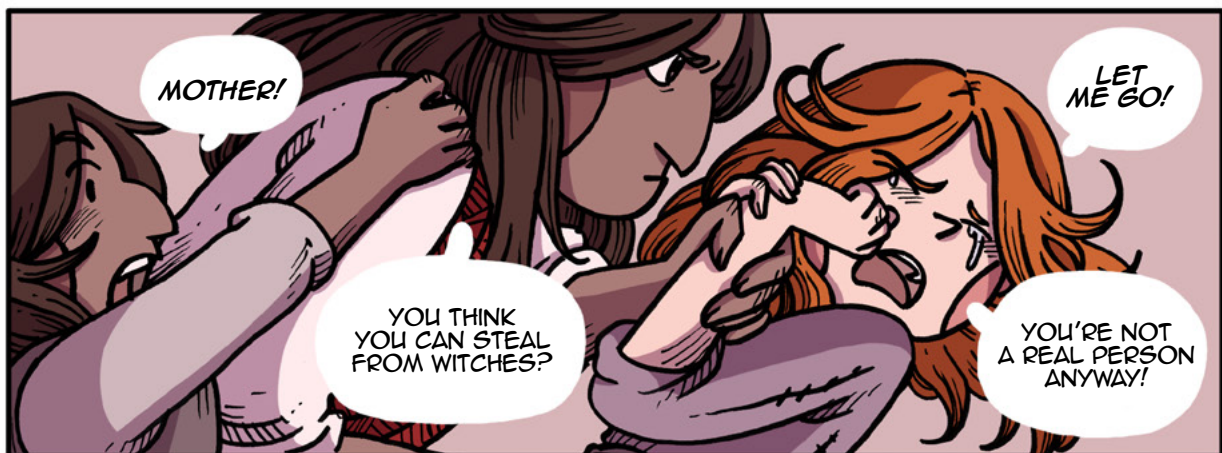
JOANNE WEBSTER is a writer who lives in New Brunswick with her husband, surrounded by their fortress of trees. She mostly works with fantasy stories and fairy tales of all kinds, inspired by her surroundings.

Prunella

Story by Megan Lavey-Heaton and Isabelle Melançon

Art by Isabelle Melançon





IN A VILLAGE NEAR THE RIVER, THERE LIVED A GIRL CALLED PRUNELLA. SHE USED TO HAVE ANOTHER NAME, BUT WHEN SHE WAS A CHILD, THE WITCH OF THE TREES TOOK HER NAME.

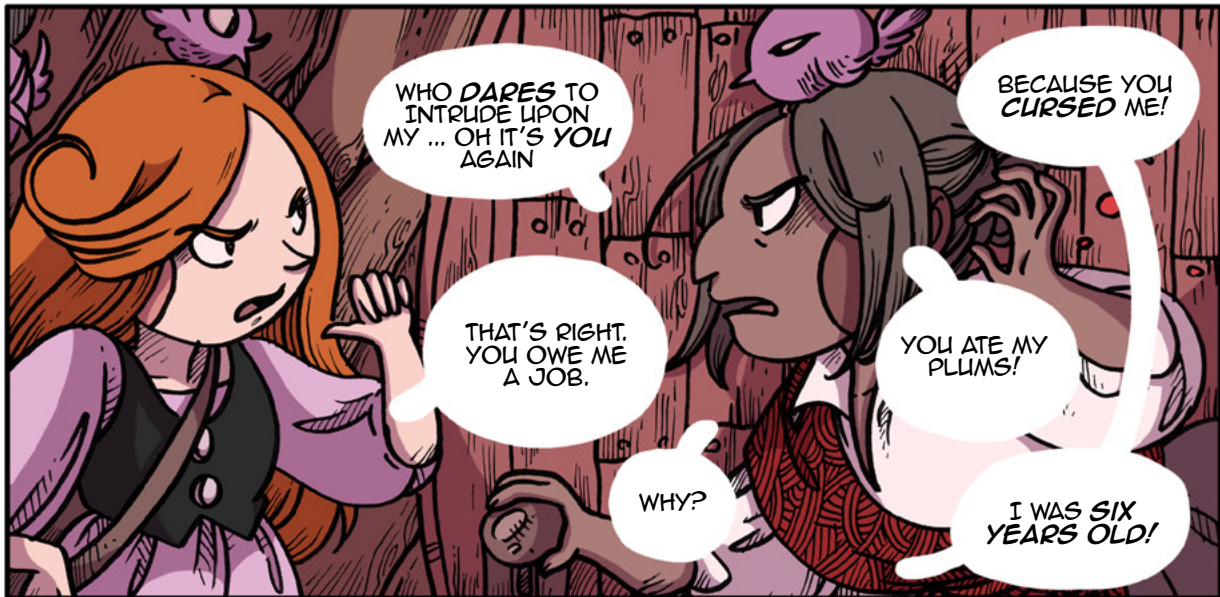
STUPID
WITCH.

STUPID
BIRDS.

THIS CURSE CAUSED PEOPLE TO BE SCARED OF PRUNELLA AND REFUSE TO GIVE HER WORK. THANKFULLY, PRUNELLA WASN'T SCARED OF EITHER THE WITCH OF THE TREES OR HER SISTER, THE WITCH OF THE WINDS.

STUPID
STAIRS.





WHO *DARES* TO
INTRUDE UPON
MY ... OH IT'S *YOU*
AGAIN

BECAUSE YOU
CURSED ME!

THAT'S RIGHT,
YOU OWE ME
A JOB.

YOU ATE MY
PLUMS!

WHY?

I WAS *SIX*
YEARS OLD!



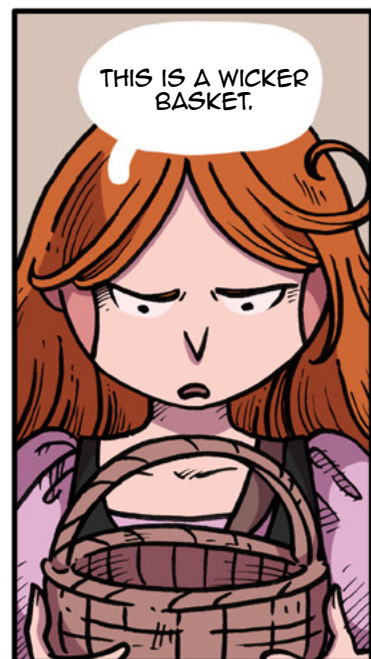
I DON'T LIKE
YOU ...

... BUT I DO NEED
A MAID.

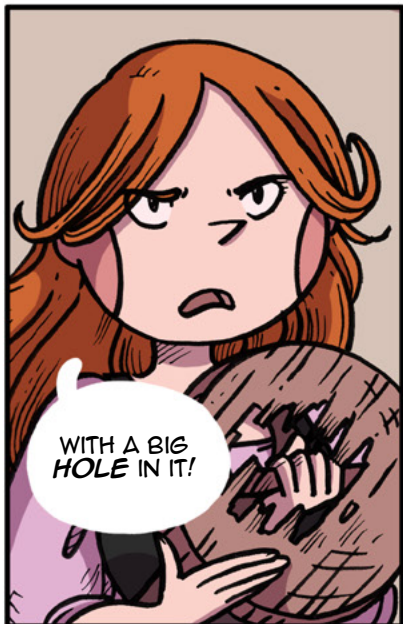


HERE.

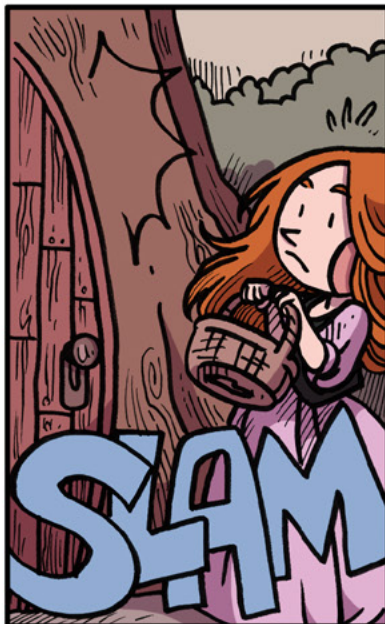
FILL THIS WITH
WATER AND
YOU'LL HAVE
A JOB.



THIS IS A WICKER
BASKET.



WITH A BIG
HOLE IN IT!



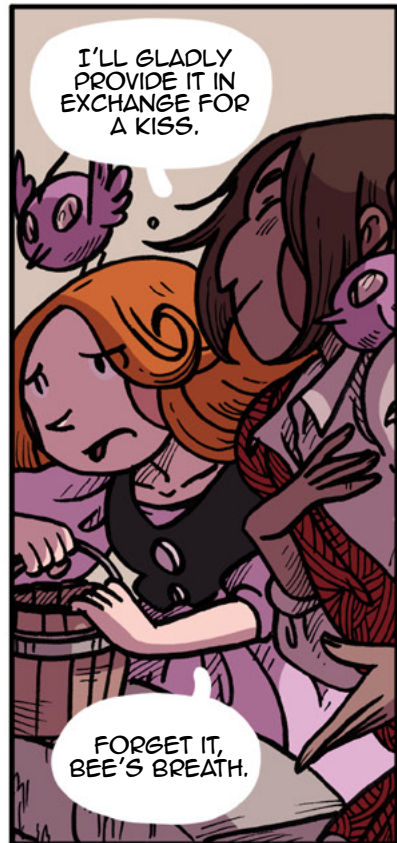
SLAM



OF ALL
THE ...

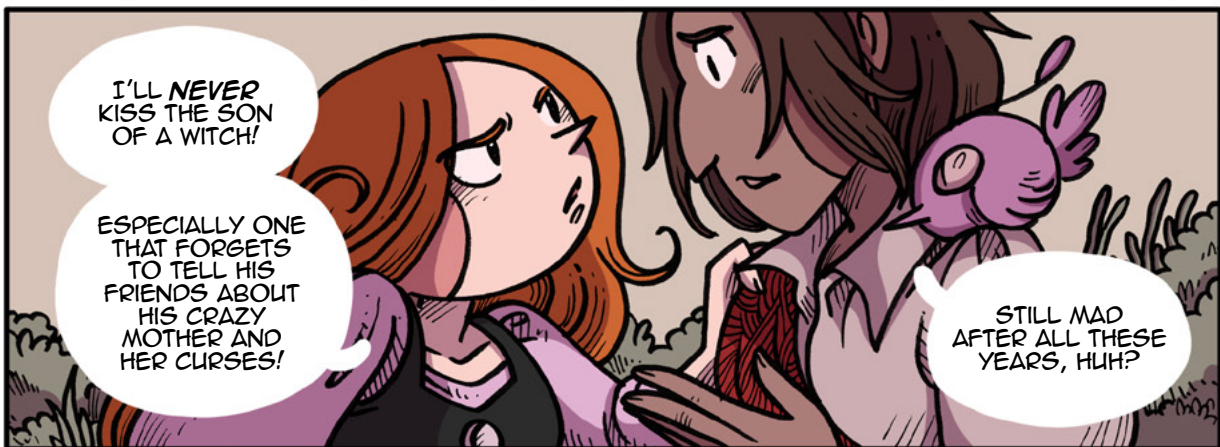


GOOD MORNING,
DEAR PRUNELLA!
NEED ANY HELP?



I'LL GLADLY
PROVIDE IT IN
EXCHANGE FOR
A KISS.

FORGET IT,
BEE'S BREATH.



I'LL **NEVER**
KISS THE SON
OF A WITCH!

ESPECIALLY ONE
THAT FORGETS
TO TELL HIS
FRIENDS ABOUT
HIS CRAZY
MOTHER AND
HER CURSES!

STILL MAD
AFTER ALL THESE
YEARS, HUH?



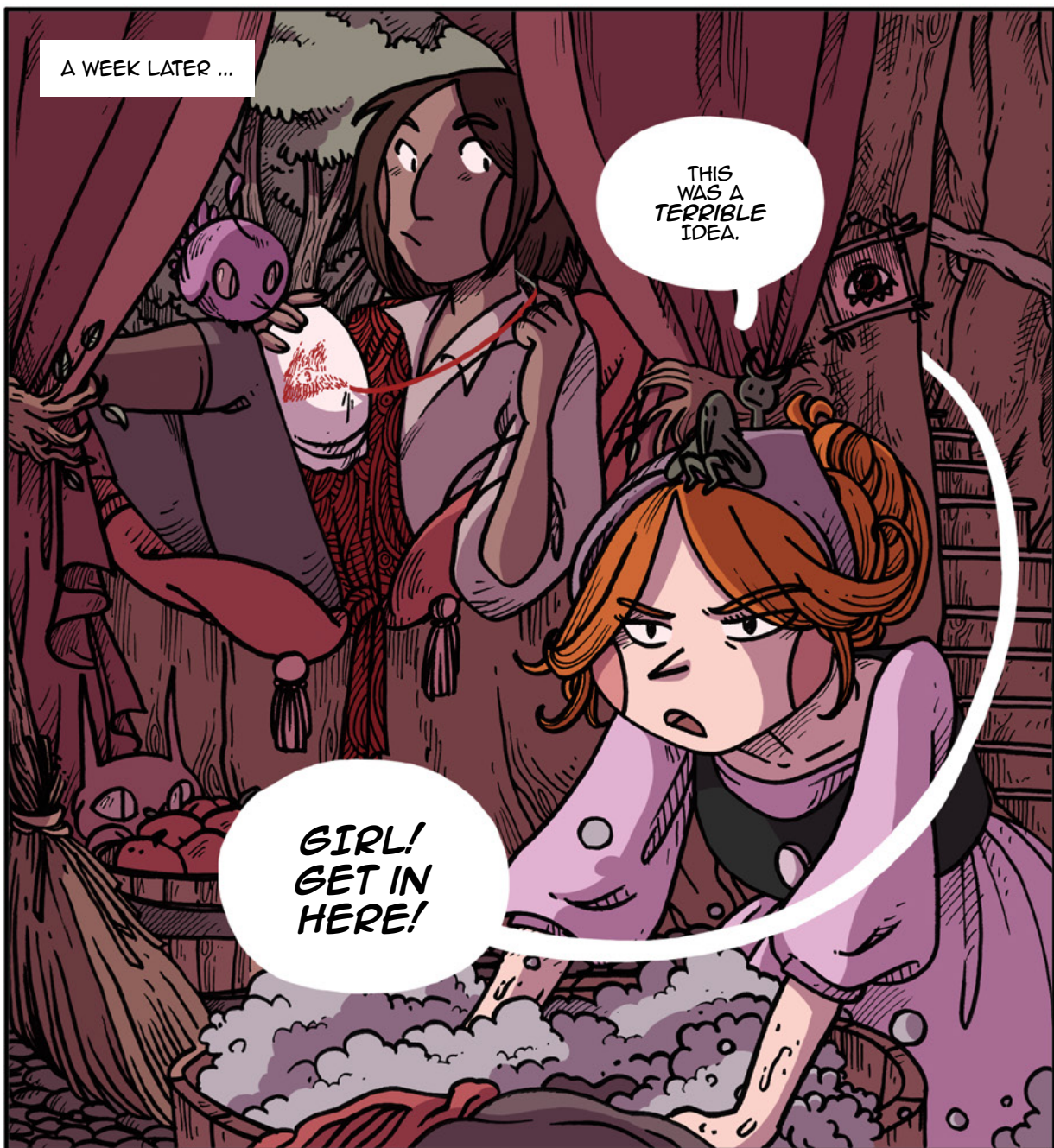
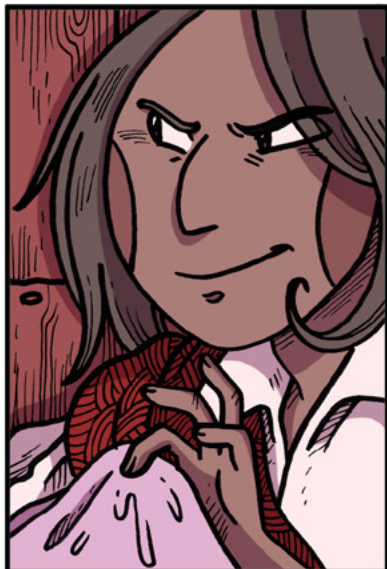
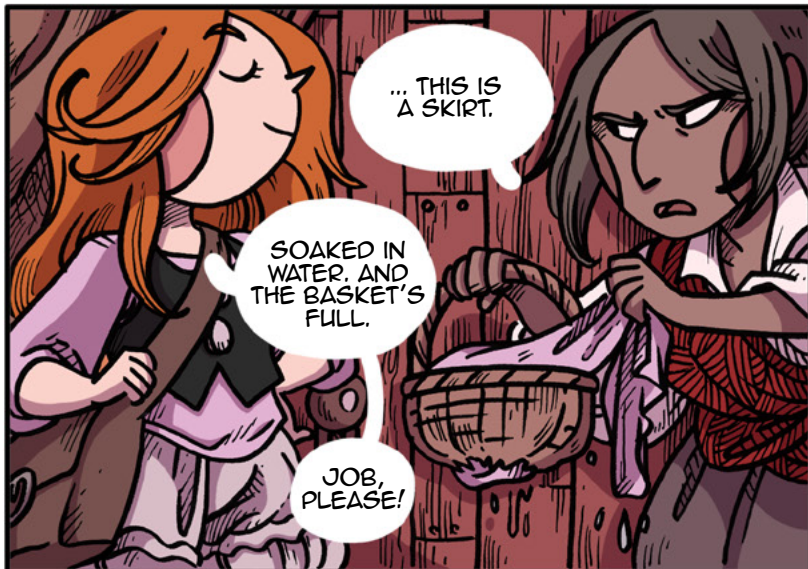
GEE,
YOU
THINK?



I CAN
DO THIS
MYSELF!



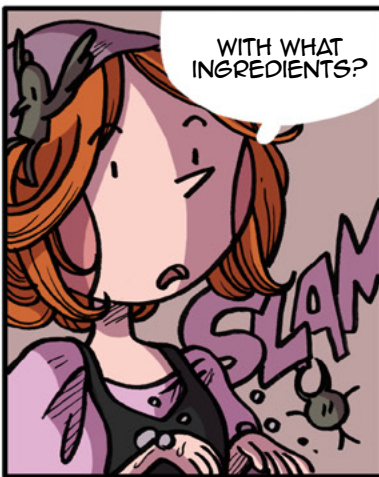
FLAK!



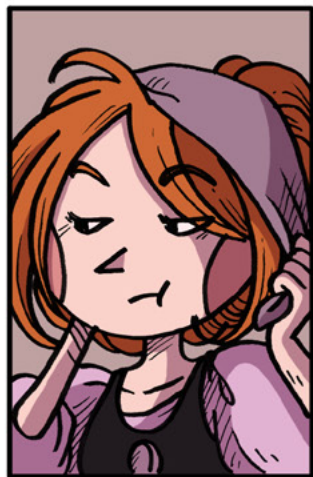


BAKE
ME SOME
BREAD FOR
A SPELL!

MAKE SURE
IT'S READY
WHEN I RETURN
FROM MY
SISTER'S OR
ELSE!



WITH WHAT
INGREDIENTS?



HEY, I JUST
HAPPENED TO
GRAB THIS BREAD
THIS MORNING.
WANT IT?



ASSUMING YOU
WANT TO KEEP
YOUR JOB.

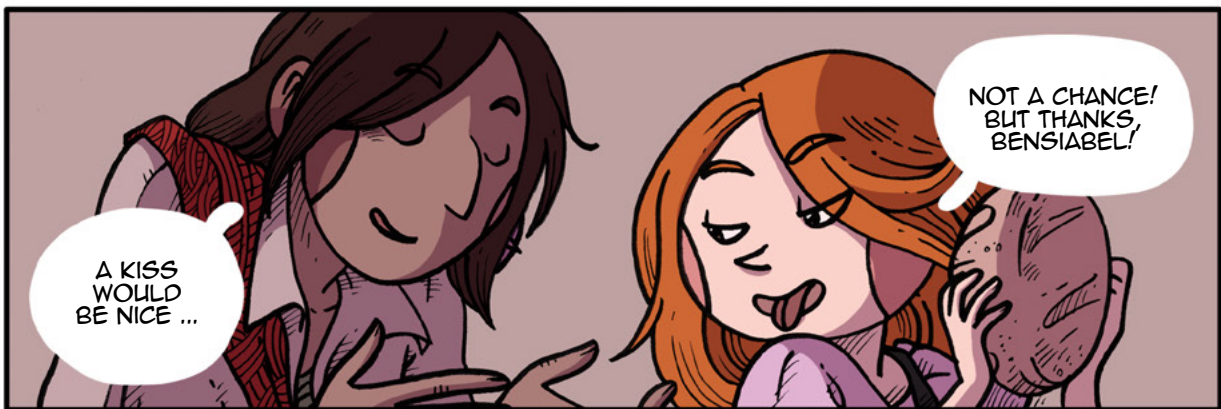
I DO!

WELL,
I DON'T,
BUT I DO!



WAIT.

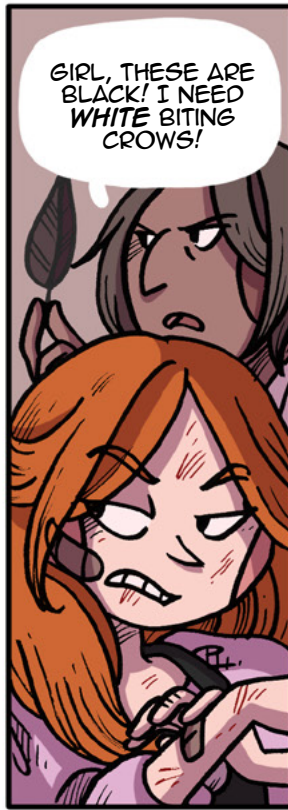
DO
I HAVE TO
KISS YOU
FOR THIS?



A KISS
WOULD
BE NICE ...

NOT A CHANCE!
BUT THANKS,
BENSIABEL!







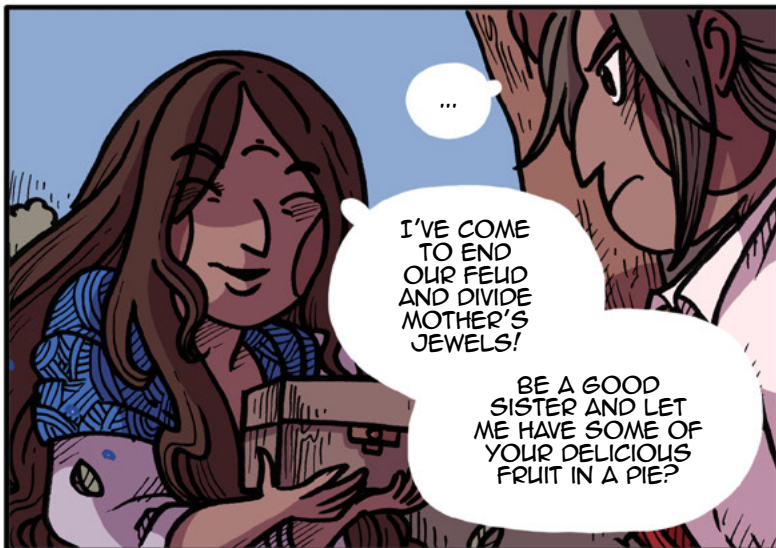
TABITHA! CEASE
THOSE *INFERNAL*
WINDS THIS
INSTANT!



AS YOU
WISH ...



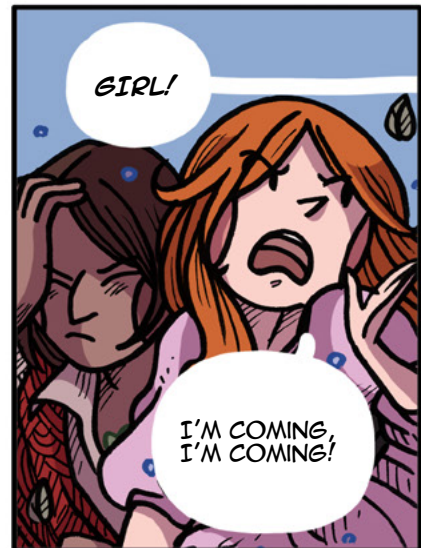
... DEAR
AGATHA.



...

I'VE COME
TO END
OUR FEUD
AND DIVIDE
MOTHER'S
JEWELS!

BE A GOOD
SISTER AND LET
ME HAVE SOME OF
YOUR DELICIOUS
FRUIT IN A PIE?

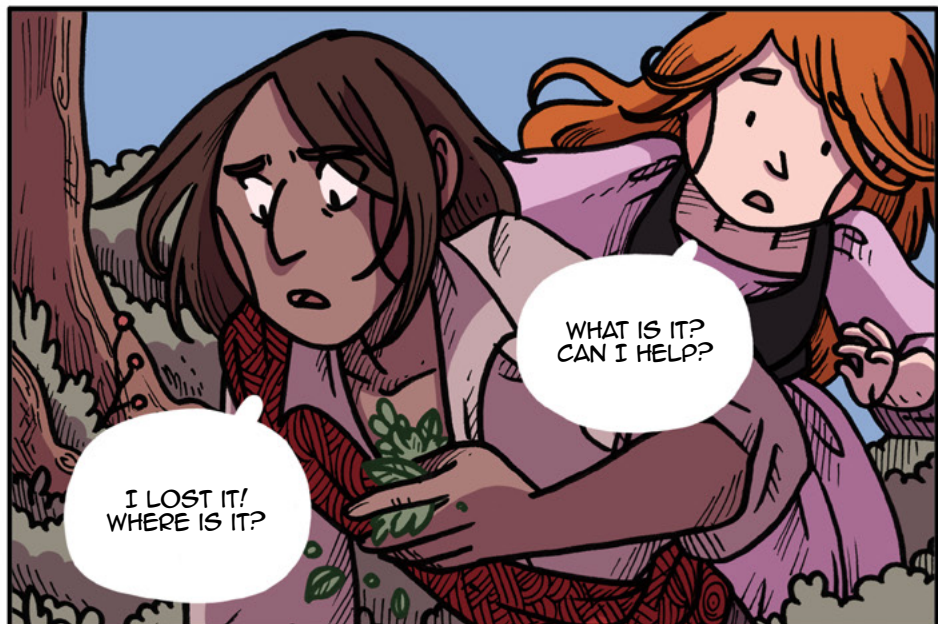


GIRL!

I'M COMING,
I'M COMING!

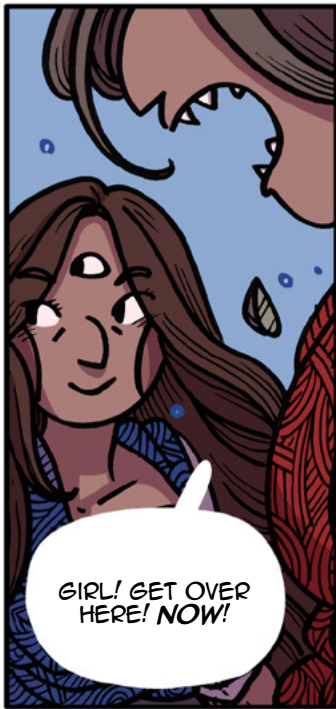


OH
NO ...



I LOST IT!
WHERE IS IT?

WHAT IS IT?
CAN I HELP?



GIRL! GET OVER
HERE! NOW!



JUST
A SECOND!



NOW!

OR I WILL
CHANGE YOU
INTO A TOAD!



YOU TOO,
BENSIABEL!



I DO HAVE A NAME,
YOU KNOW.

A HORRIBLE
ONE.

WHOSE FAULT
IS THAT?

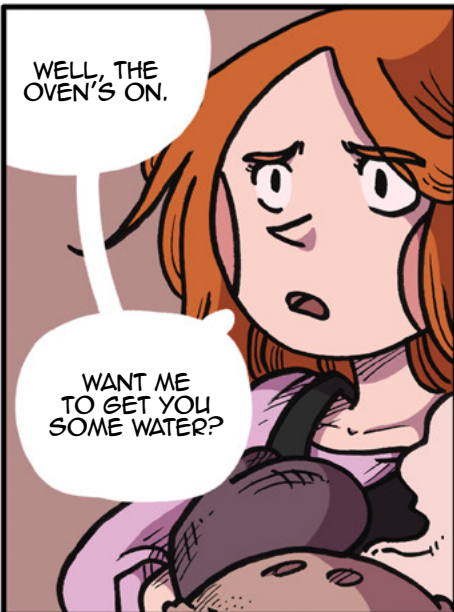
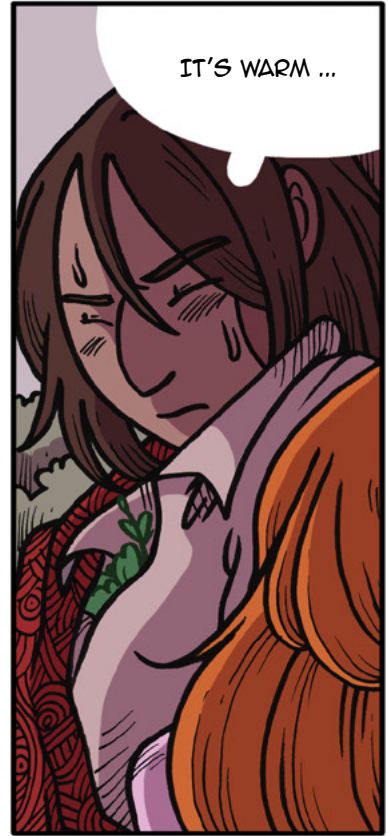
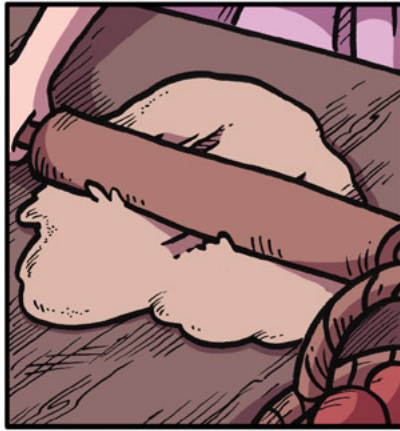
OH GO GET FRUIT
TO MAKE A PIE.
MAKE SURE IT HAS
WORMS.

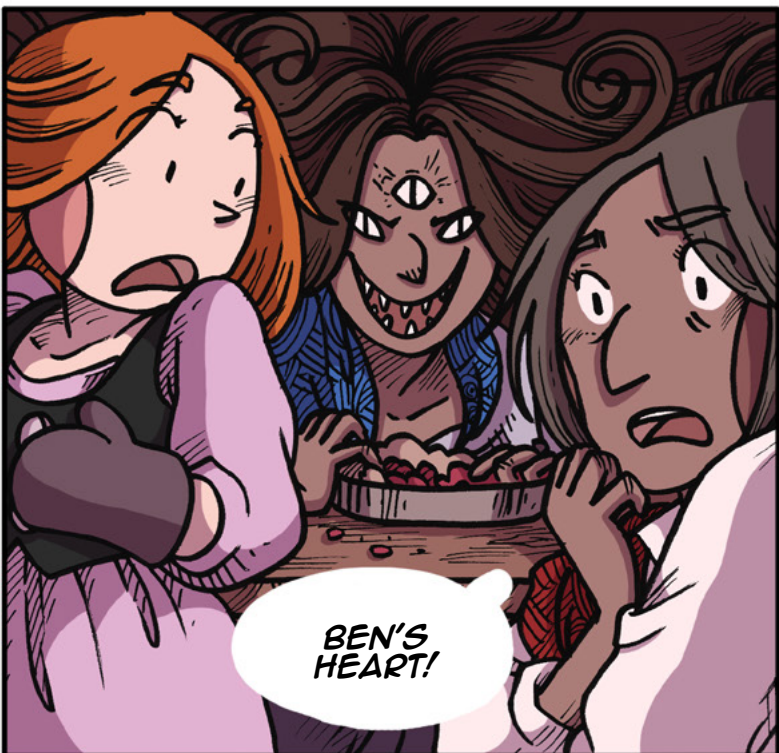
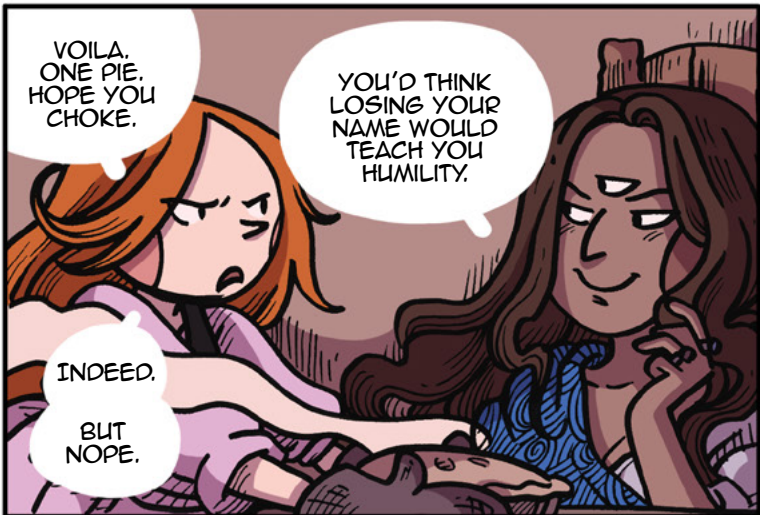
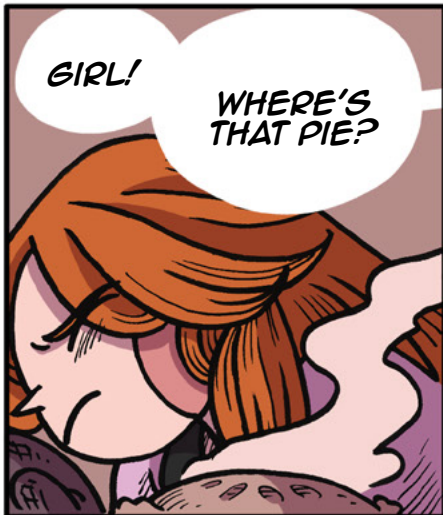
BEN, GO TO THE
KITCHEN AND STAY
THERE UNTIL I
TELL YOU
OTHERWISE.

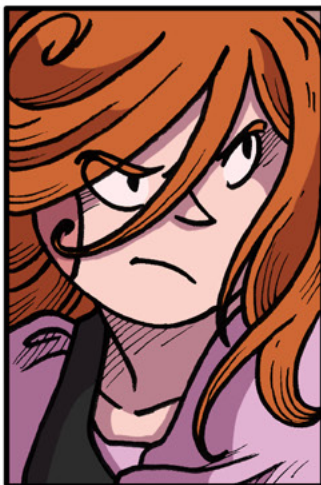
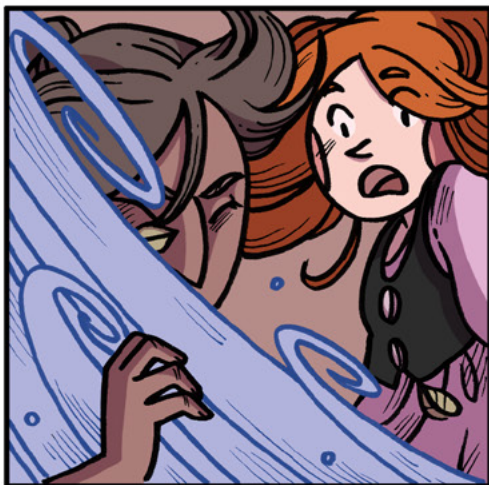
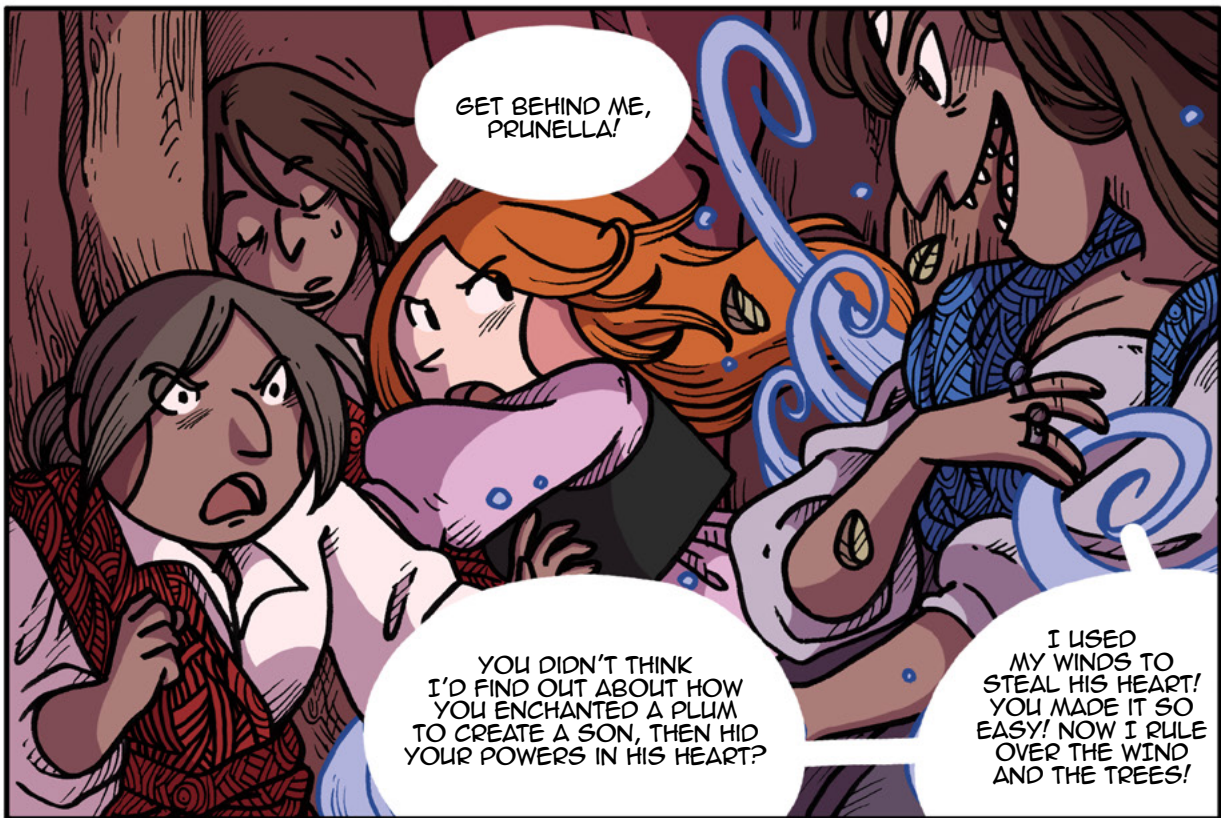


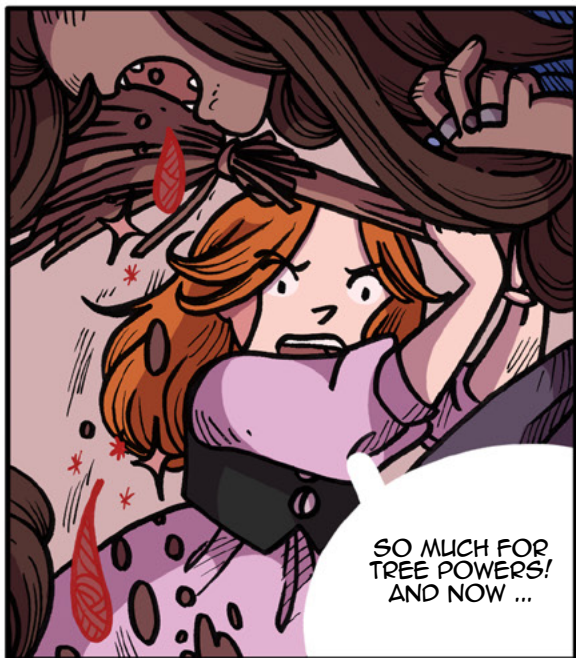
MOTHER, I ...

DON'T ARGUE.
YOUR AUNT IS
HERE, AND ALL
SHE NEEDS IS
ONE DISTRACTION
TO MESS THINGS
UP.









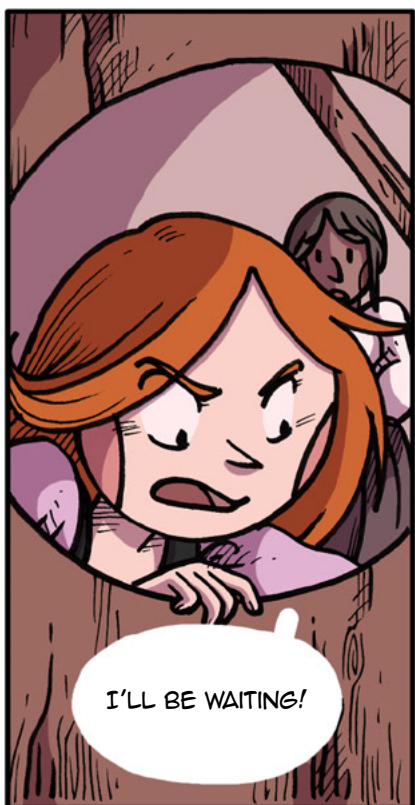
SO MUCH FOR
TREE POWERS!
AND NOW ...



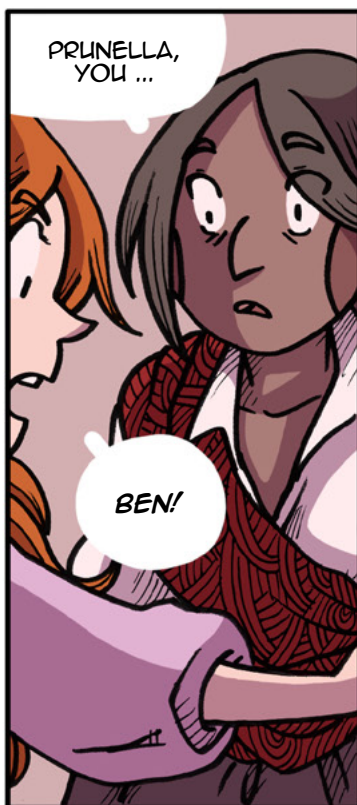
GET
OUT!



I'LL BE BACK,
SISTER! YOUR
DEMONIC SERVANT
DOESN'T SCARE
ME!

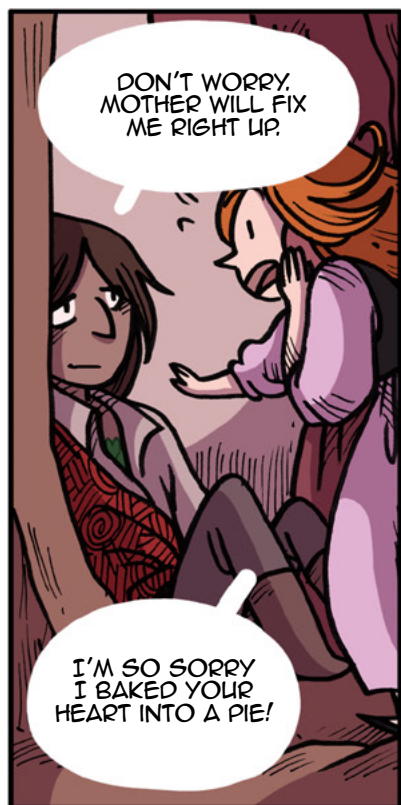


I'LL BE WAITING!



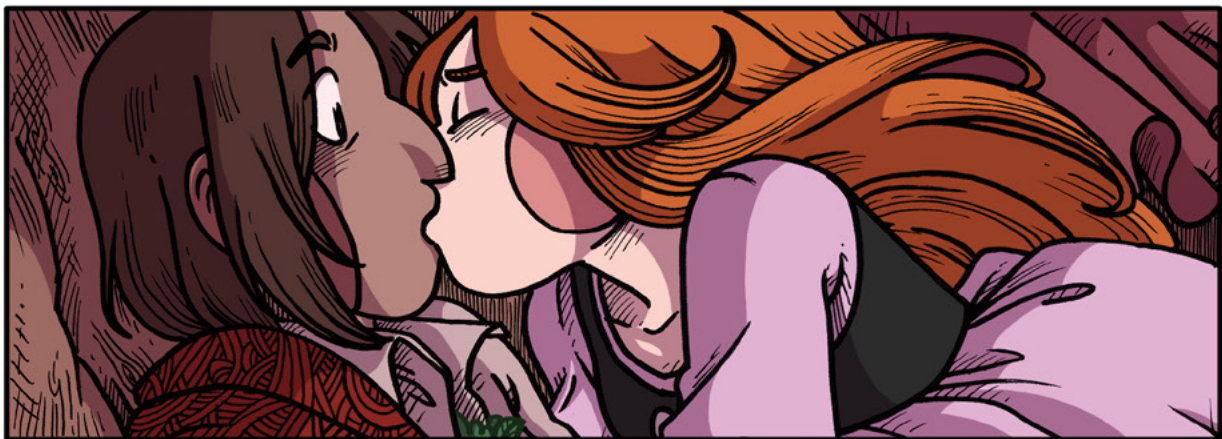
PRUNELLA,
YOU ...

BEN!

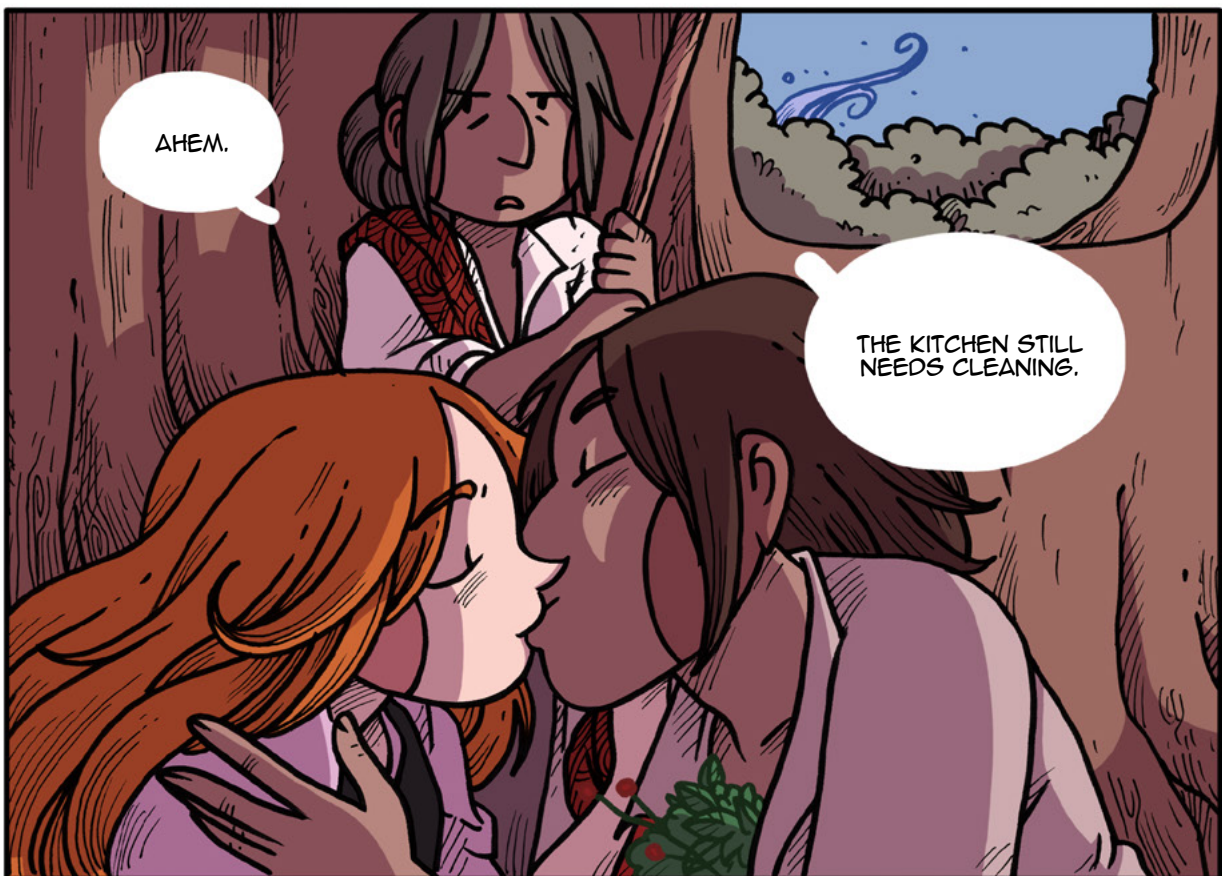
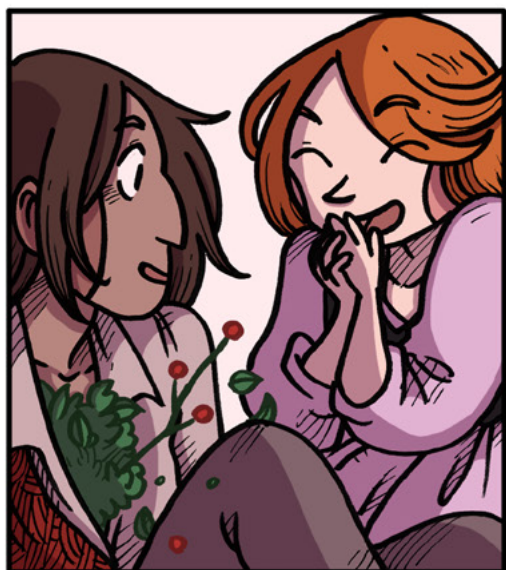


DON'T WORRY.
MOTHER WILL FIX
ME RIGHT UP.

I'M SO SORRY
I BAKED YOUR
HEART INTO A PIE!



I OWED YOU A KISS FOR THAT.



AHEM.

THE KITCHEN STILL NEEDS CLEANING.

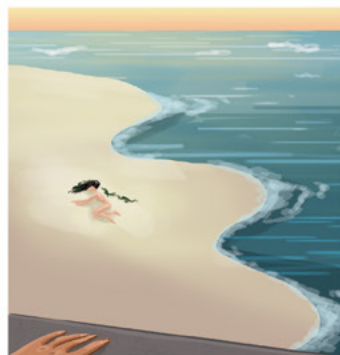
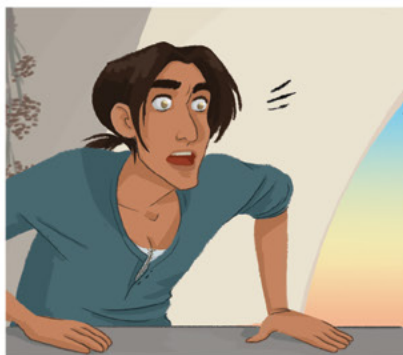
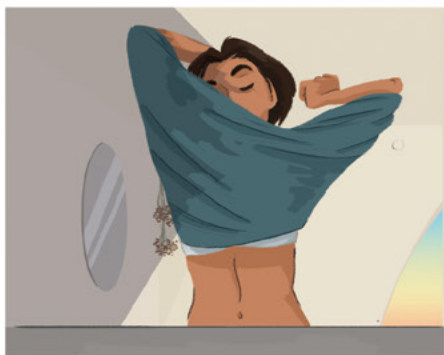
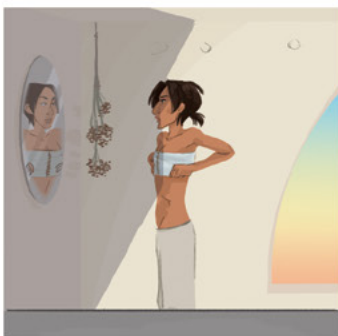
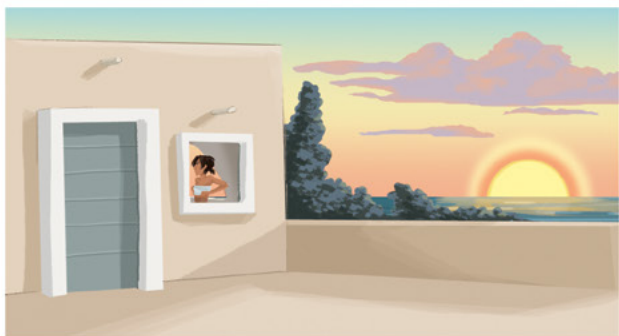


Little Fish

By Emily Hann

Based on 'The Little Mermaid'
by Hans Christian Andersen

THE DAY SHE CAME FROM THE OCEAN...



... HOW COULD I HAVE KNOWN WHAT THAT REALLY MEANT?



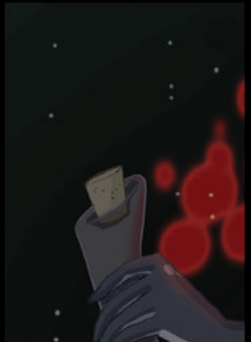
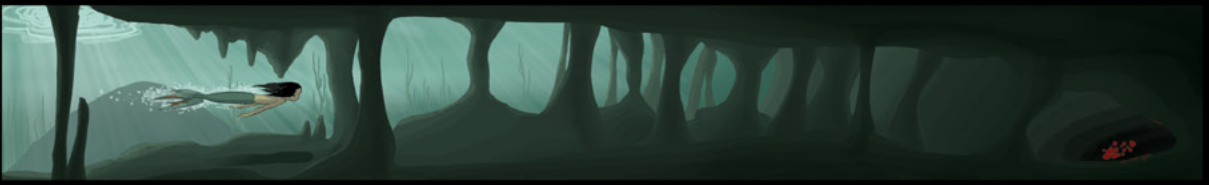


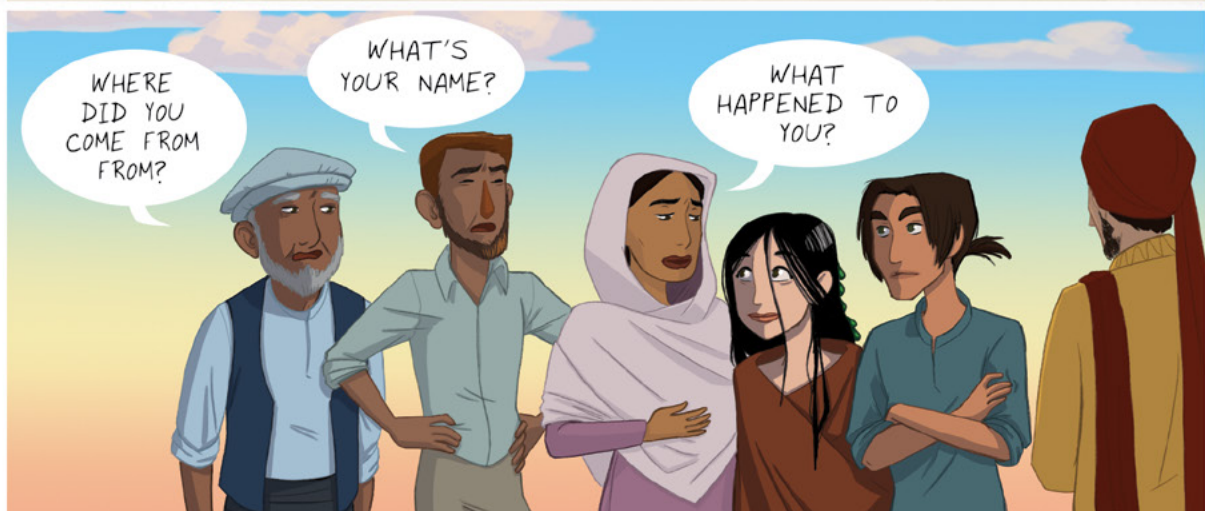
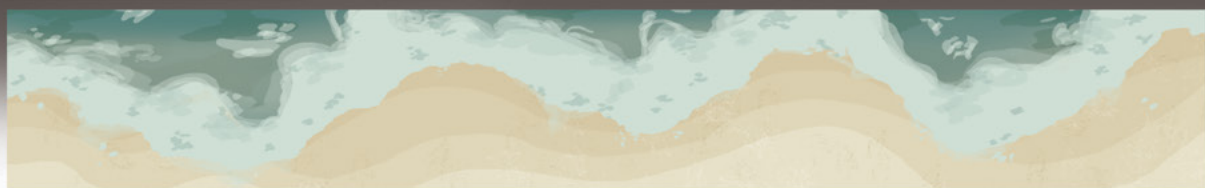
THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN WAS COLD.



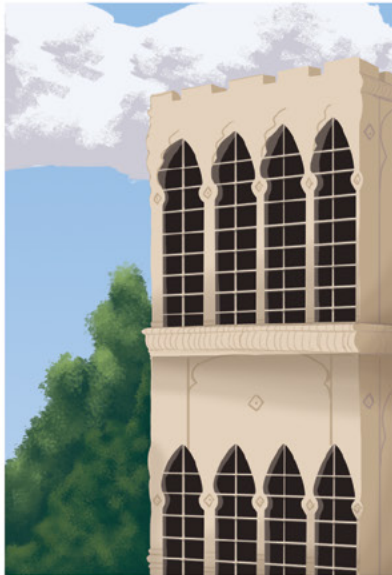
AND
HER
COLD
MERMAID
FAMILY
SHUNNED
HER
AFFECTION.



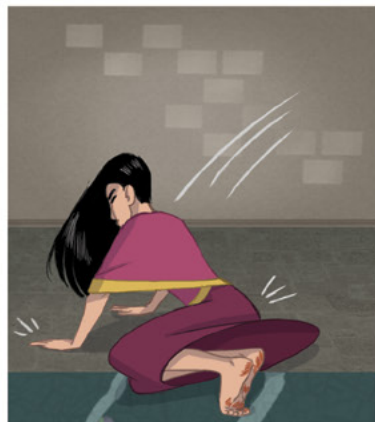
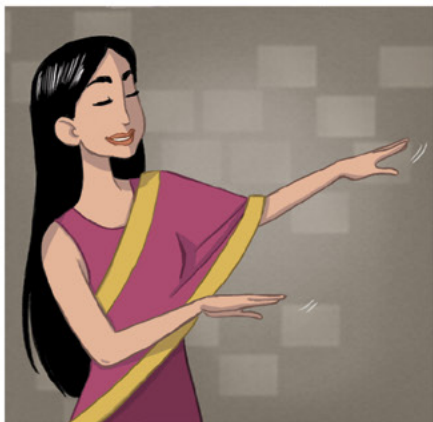
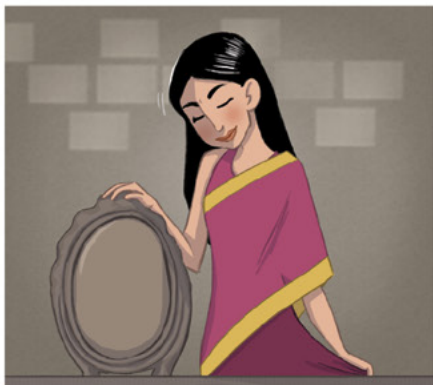


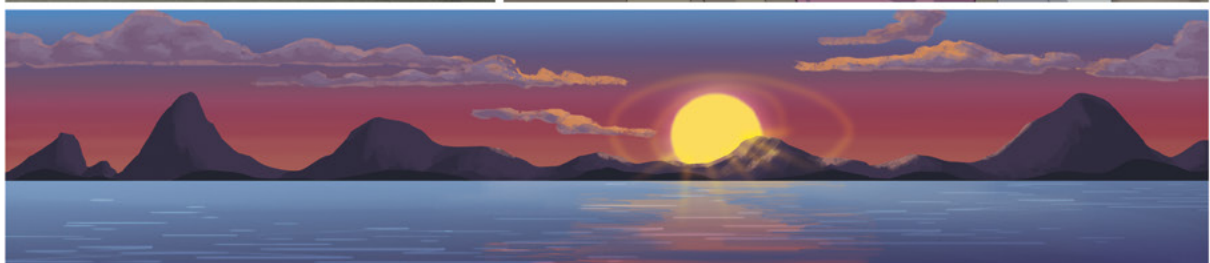


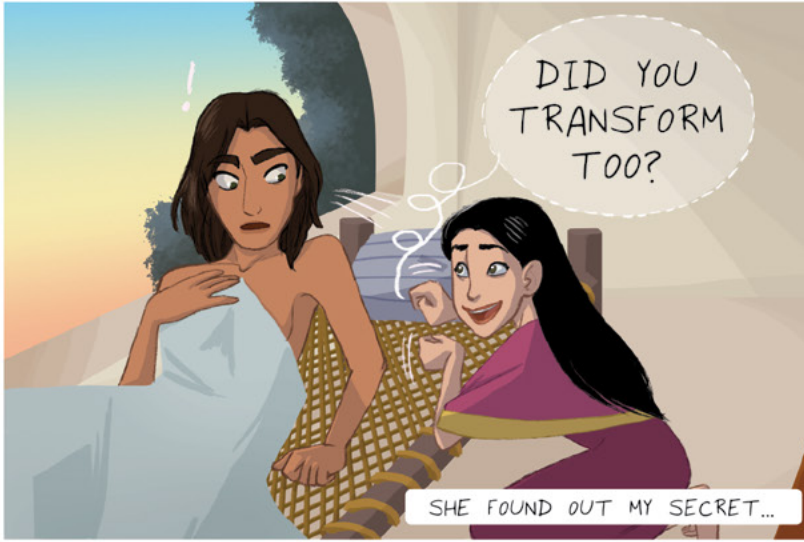


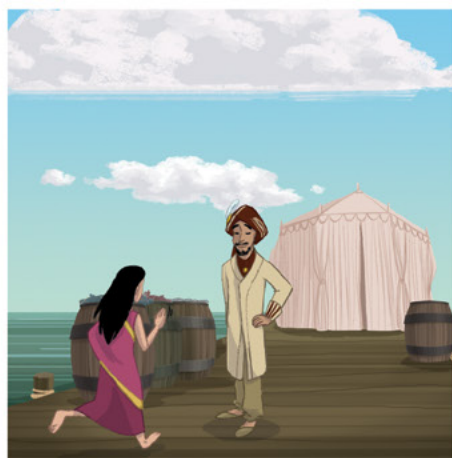


AFTER A FEW LESSONS, SHE WANTED TO SHOW THE PRINCE WHAT SHE COULD DO.

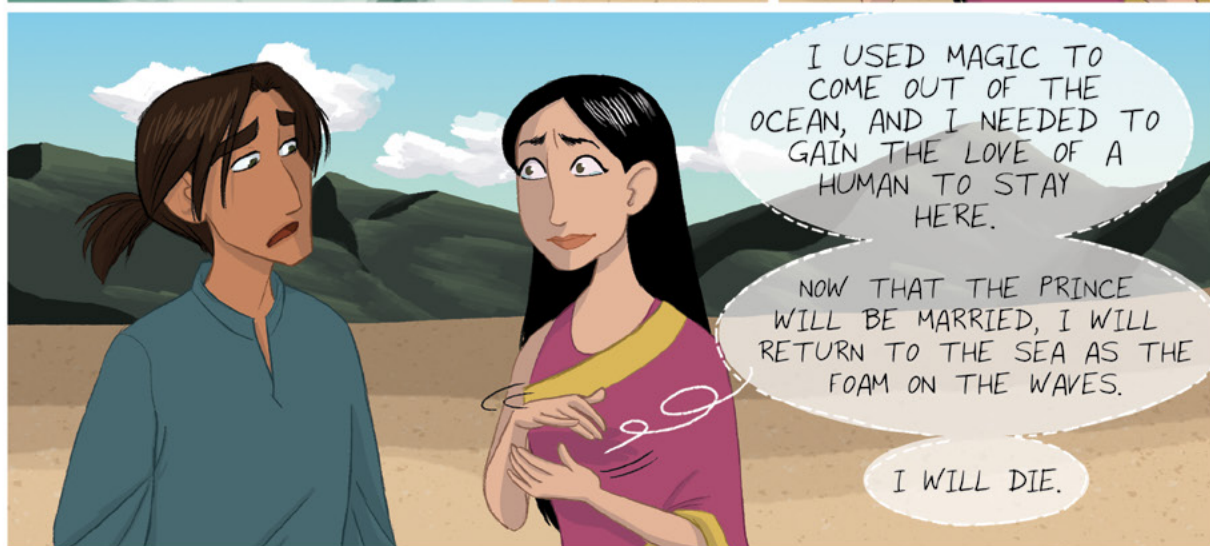


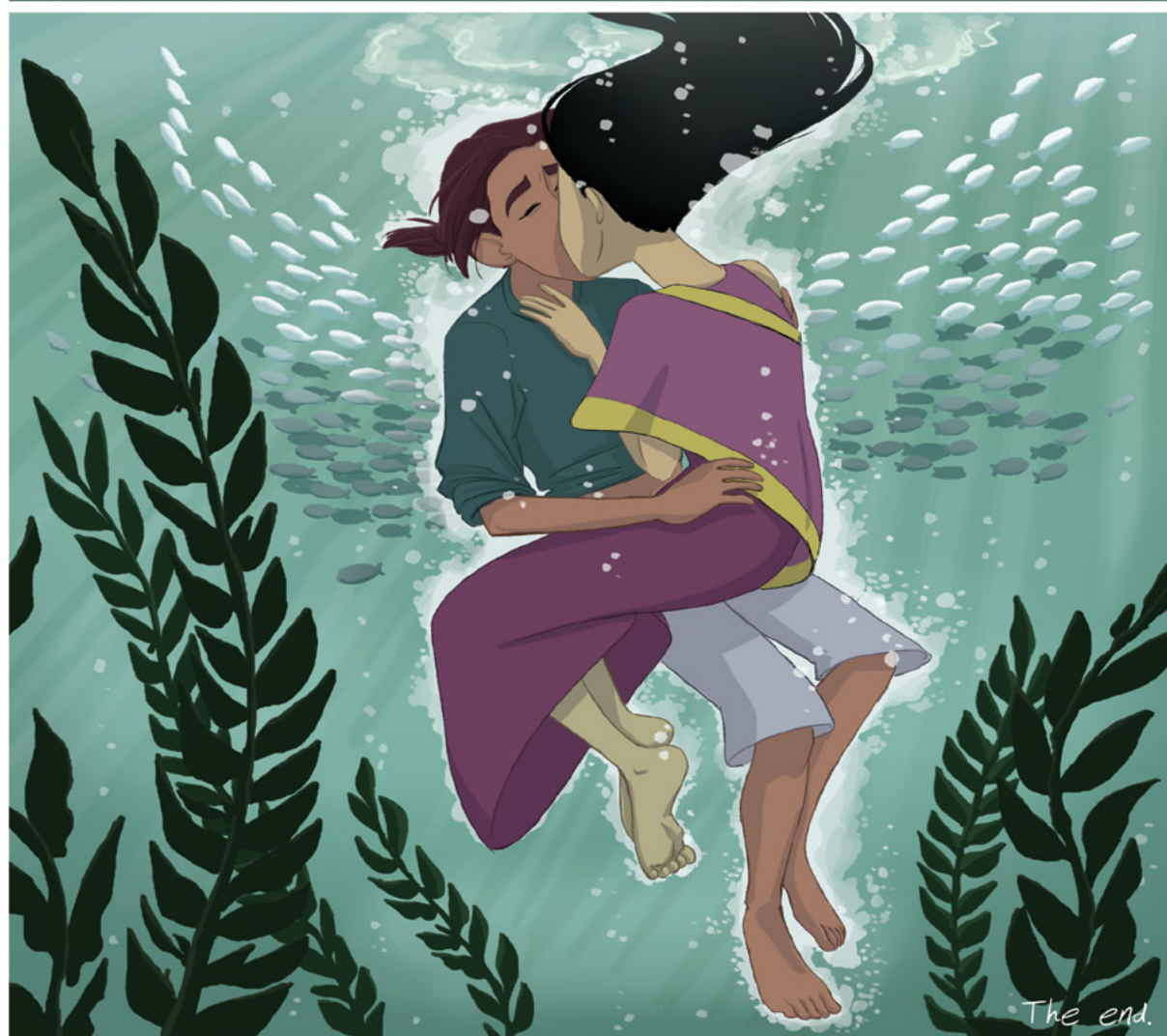












Bride of the



Rose Beast

BY MICHELLE "MISHA" KRIVANEK



I NEVER KNEW THAT MY
WEDDING NIGHT WOULD BE
THIS DANGEROUS...



NO MATTER
WHAT HAPPENS....

I MUST BE READY...

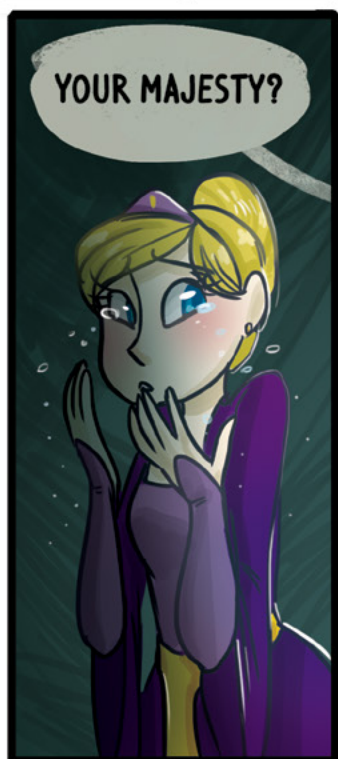


ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE
WAS A HAPPY KINGDOM,
EXCEPT FOR ONE PROBLEM...

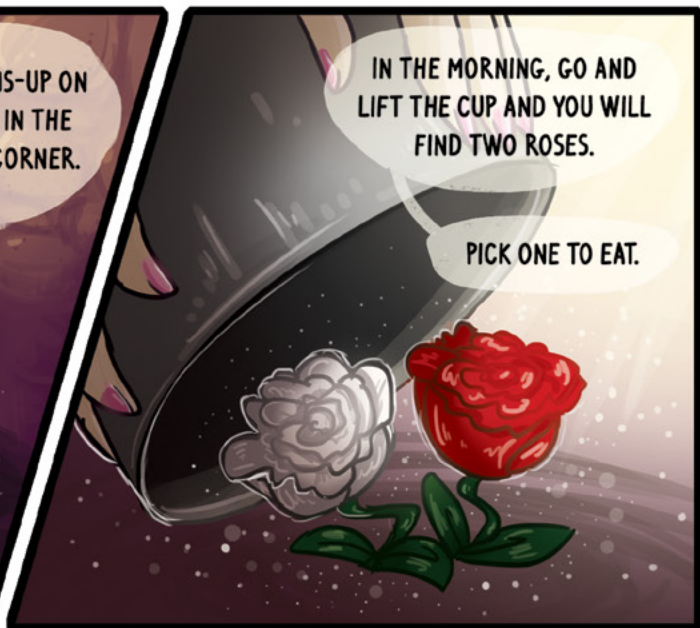
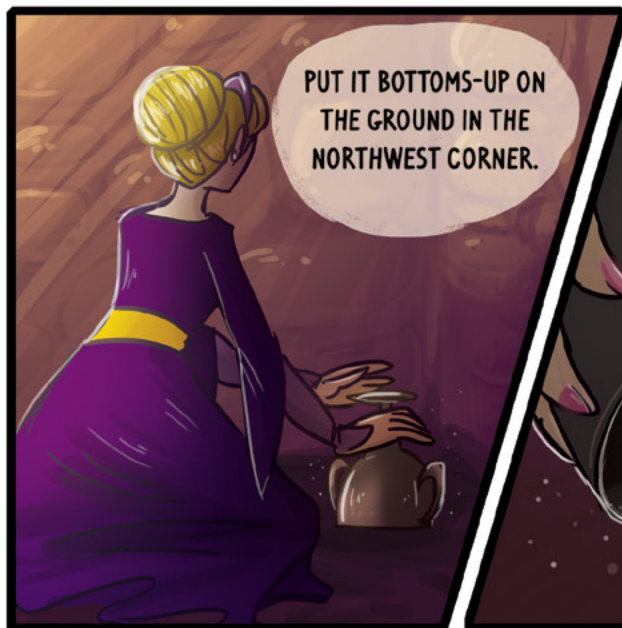
THE KING AND QUEEN OF
THE LAND HAD NO CHILD
OF THEIR OWN.



ONE DAY, THE SAD QUEEN
WENT ON A WALK
THROUGH THE WOODS.



YOUR MAJESTY?



IF YOU EAT THE WHITE ROSE,
A LITTLE GIRL WILL BE BORN.

IF YOU PICK THE RED ROSE,
YOU WILL HAVE A LITTLE BOY.

BUT I WARN YOU,
DO NOT EAT BOTH!

IF YOU EAT BOTH THE ROSES,
TERRIBLE EVENTS SHALL OCCUR.

REMEMBER: ONLY ONE!

AFTER THINKING HARD ABOUT IT,
THE QUEEN FINALLY CHOSE TO
EAT THE WHITE ROSE.

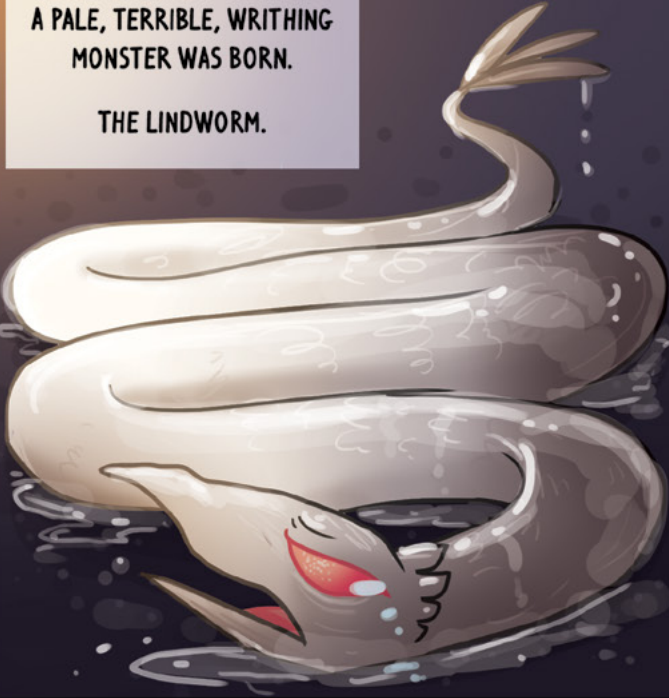
BUT IT TASTED TOO SWEET AND DELICIOUS.
SHE COMPLETELY FORGOT THE WITCH'S WARNING
AND ATE THE RED ROSE AS WELL.

NINE MONTHS LATER, WHEN
THE KING WAS AWAY...

TWINS WERE BORN.
THE YOUNGER WAS A
HEALTHY, ROSY BABY BOY.
BUT BEFORE HE ARRIVED...

A PALE, TERRIBLE, WRITHING
MONSTER WAS BORN.

THE LINDWORM.



IT CRIED, BUT NO ONE
DARED TOUCH IT OR SHOW
IT ANY AFFECTION.
ITS OWN MOTHER TURNED
AWAY IN DISGUST.



THE MIDWIFE SHOOED IT
AWAY INTO THE WILDS.

YOU MUST NEVER
TELL THIS TO THE
KING, EVER.

YES, MAJESTY.




AND SO IT WAS
FORGOTTEN, LIKE A
BAD DREAM.

MANY YEARS PAST, AND PRINCE CRIM
GREW, HEALTHY AND STRONG, INTO A
HANDSOME YOUNG PRINCE.
UNTIL, FINALLY, IT WAS TIME FOR
HIM TO FIND A BRIDE.

SO HE SET OFF TO VISIT THE
NEIGHBORING KINGDOMS TO
FIND A PRINCESS TO WED.
BUT WHEN HE CAME TO
THE CROSSROADS...

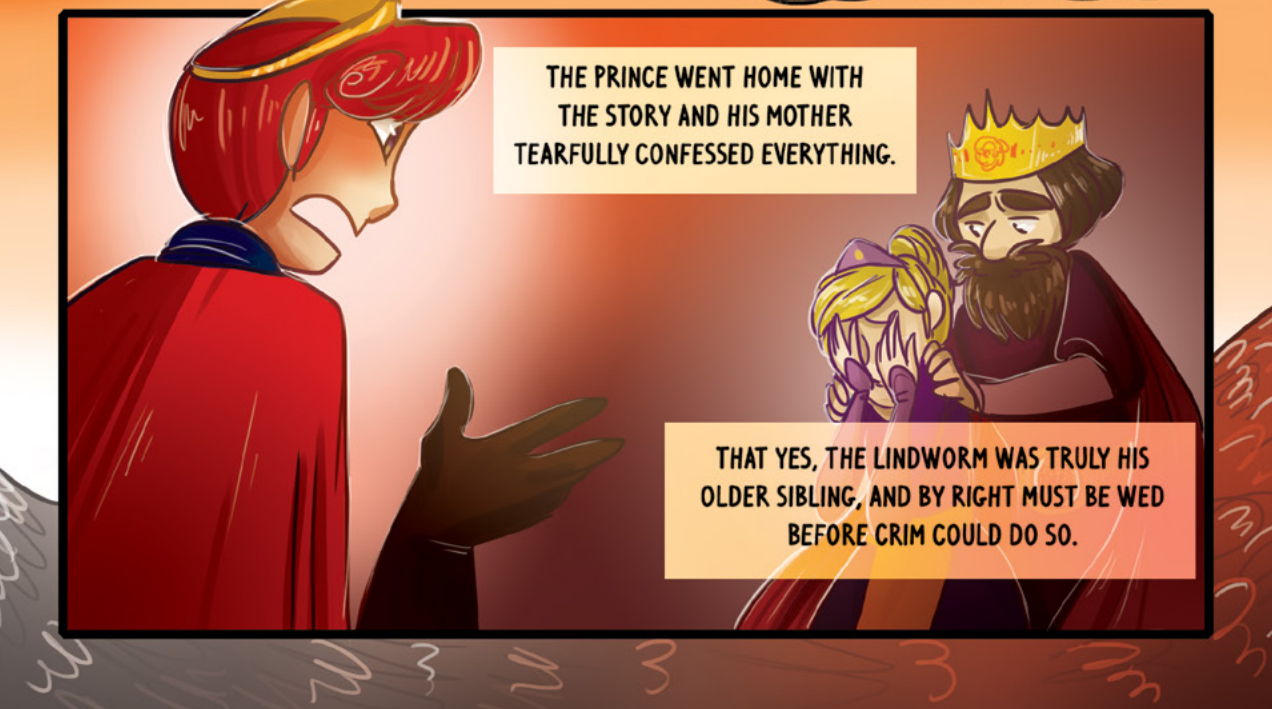




THE LINDWORM
WAS WAITING.

IT BLOCKED EVERY PATH THE
PRINCE TRIED, AND ONLY
OPENED ITS MAW TO SAY:

A BRIDE FOR
ME BEFORE A
BRIDE FOR YOU



THE PRINCE WENT HOME WITH
THE STORY AND HIS MOTHER
TEARFULLY CONFESSED EVERYTHING.

THAT YES, THE LINDWORM WAS TRULY HIS
OLDER SIBLING, AND BY RIGHT MUST BE WED
BEFORE CRIM COULD DO SO.

TWICE THE KING WROTE TO
THE NEIGHBORING KINGDOMS TO
SEND PRINCESSES TO MARRY
HIS CHILD (HE DIDN'T SPECIFY
WHICH ONE)...

TWICE THERE WAS
A GRAND WEDDING...

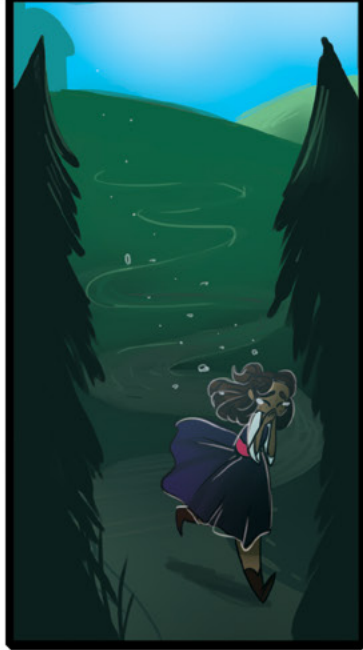
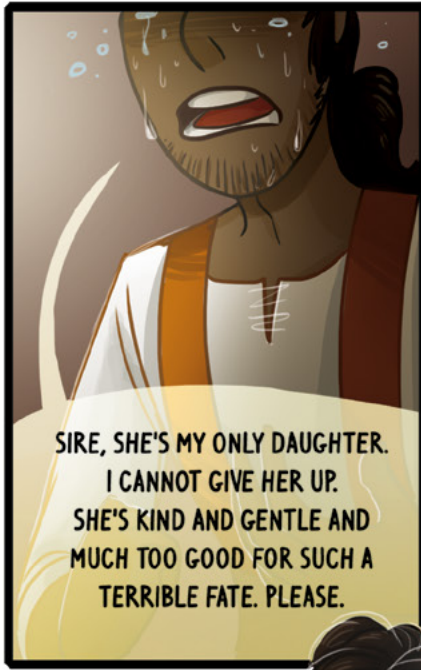
AND TWICE THE PRINCESSES
WERE DEVoured DURING
THEIR WEDDING NIGHTS.

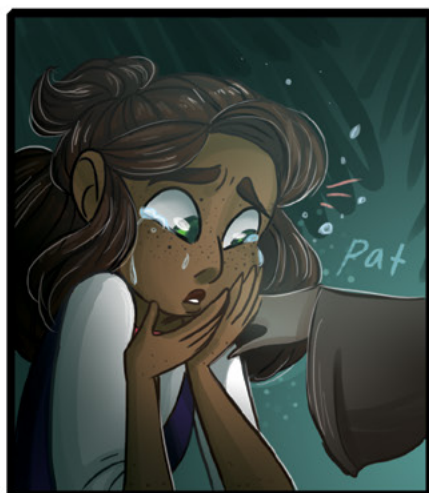
AND YET THE BEAST STILL
REPEATED THE SAME PHRASE:

A BRIDE FOR ME BEFORE A BRIDE FOR YOU

FINALLY, IN A FIT OF DESPERATION,
THE KING SOUGHT THE HELP OF THE
ROYAL SHEPHERD, A MAN WHO LIVED
WITH HIS ONLY DAUGHTER.

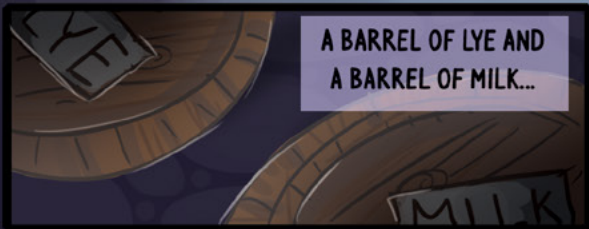








TEN SNOW WHITE SHIFTS...



A BARREL OF LYE AND
A BARREL OF MILK...



AND SEVERAL WHIPS...



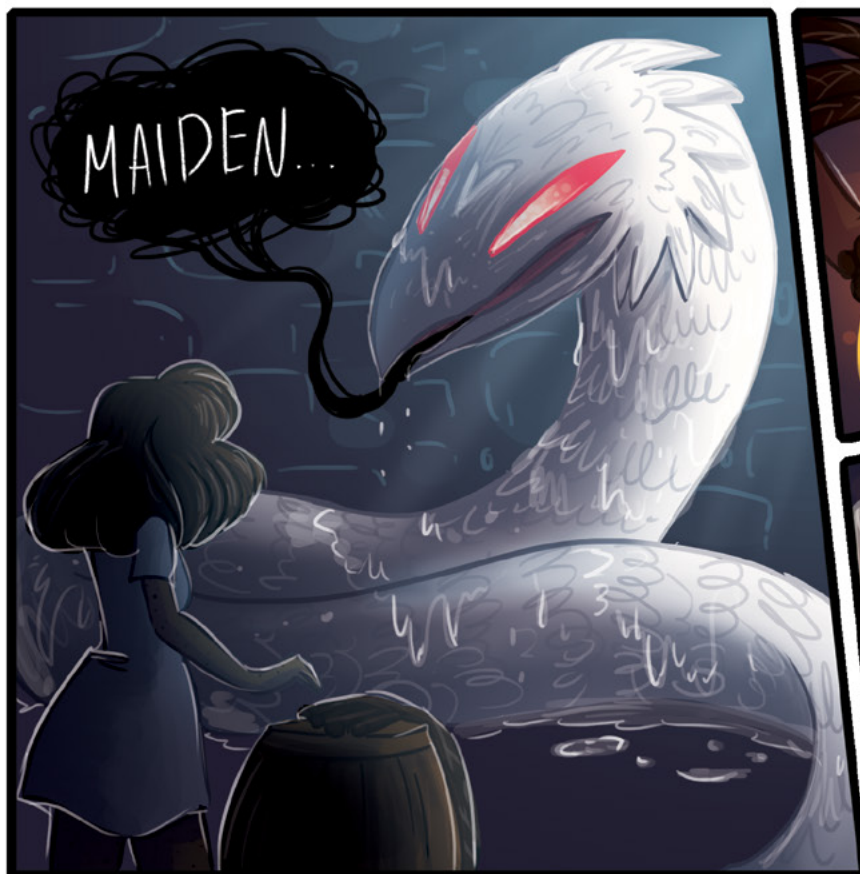
AND THUS THE NEW BRIDE
FACED HER DOOM...

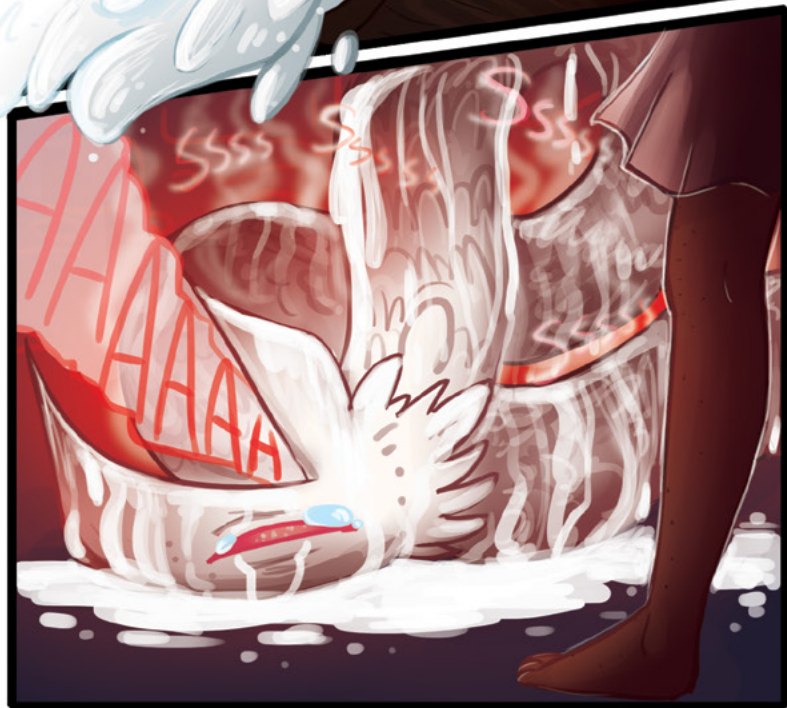


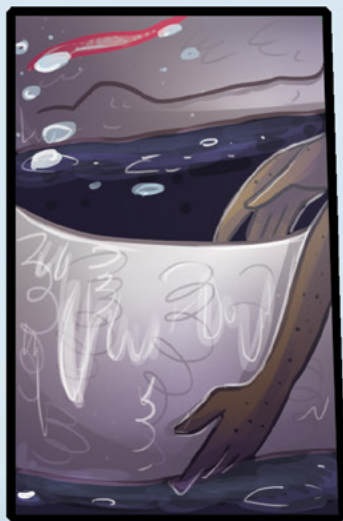
MAIDEN, SHED
A SHIFT.

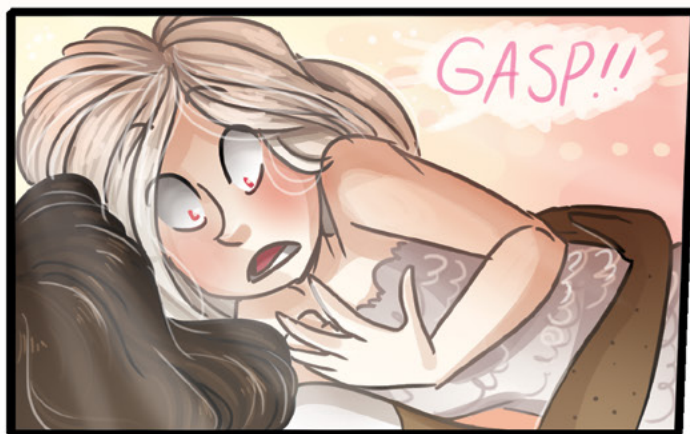
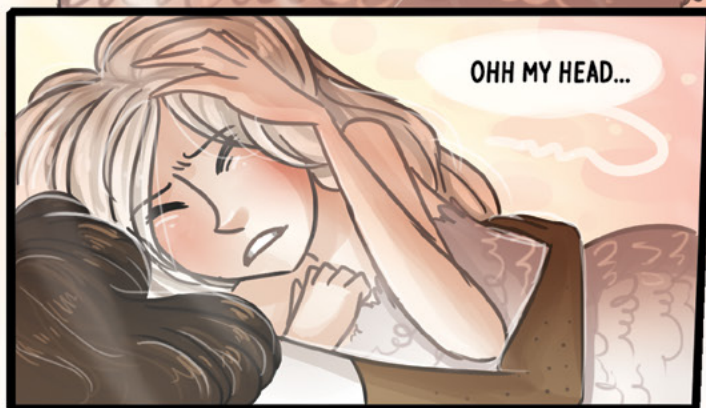
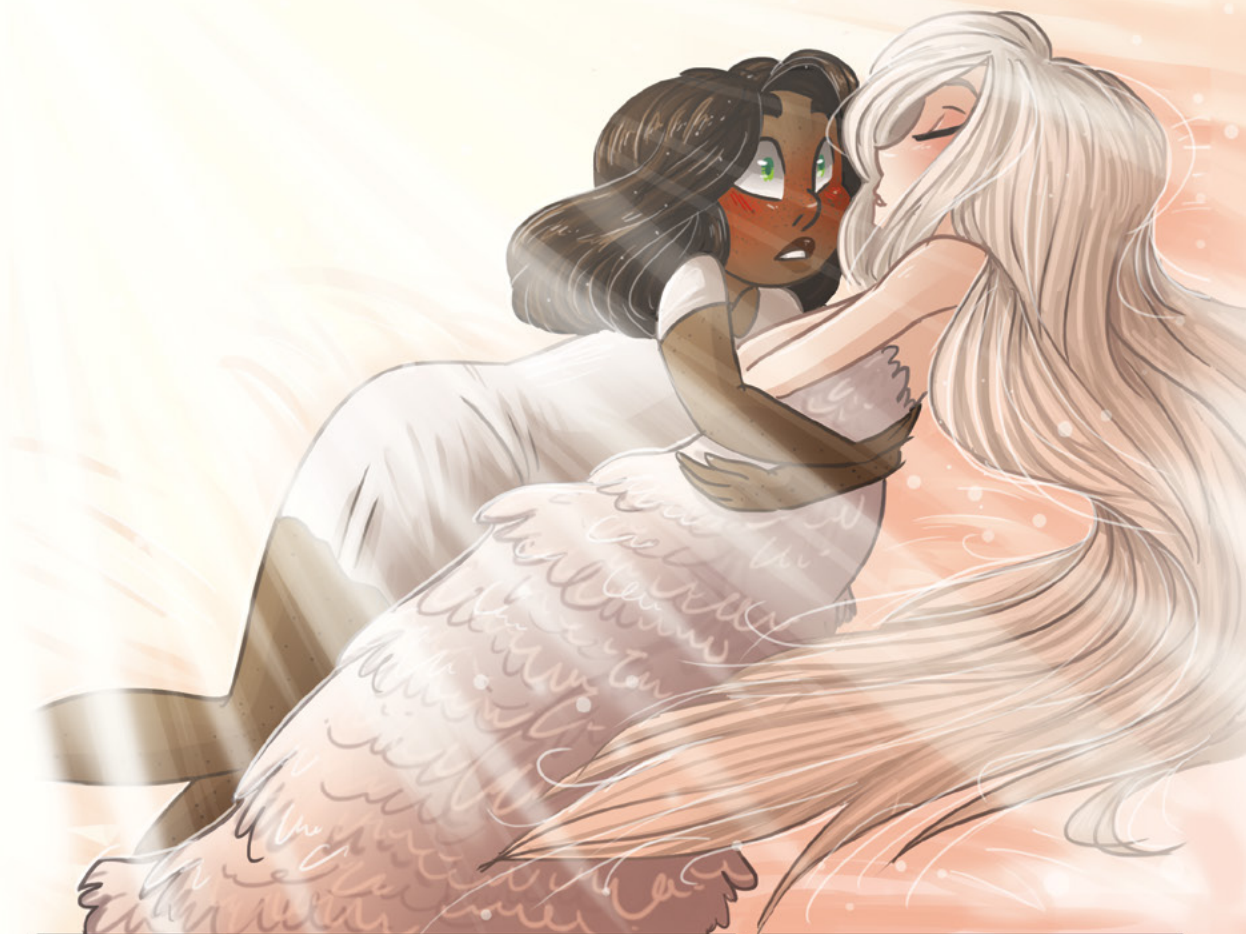
LINDWORM,
SHED A SKIN.

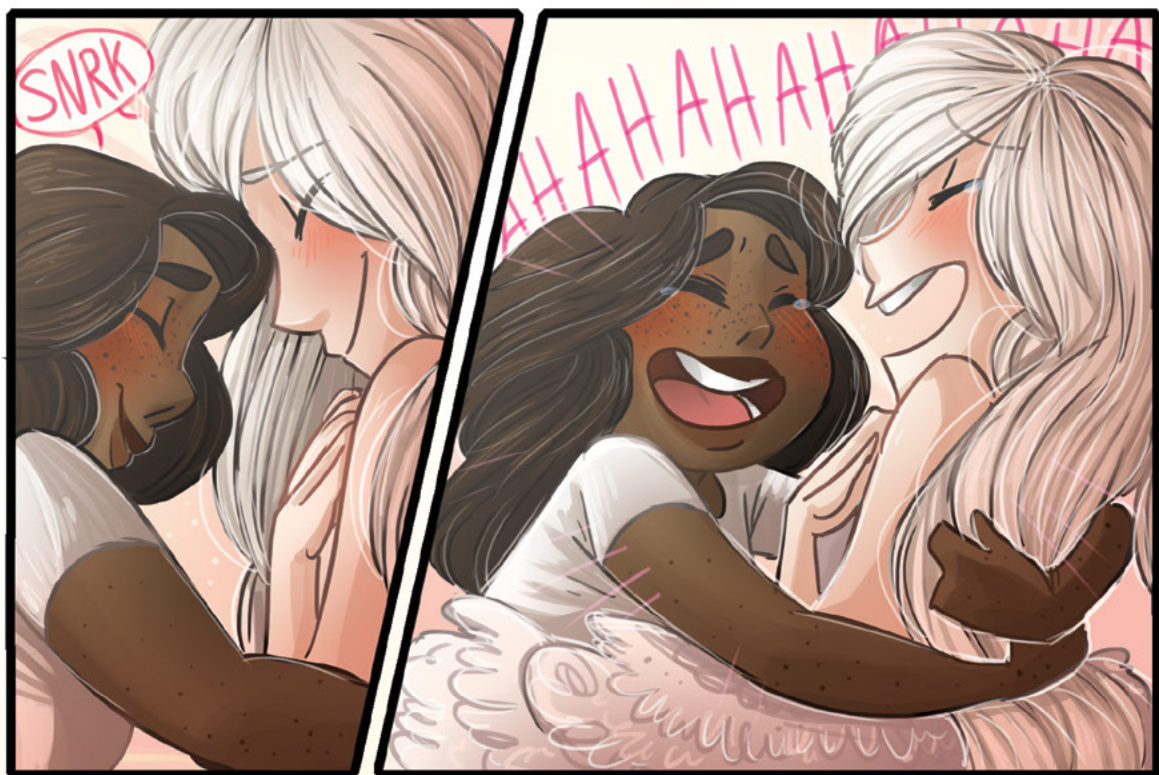












AND SO A GREAT CELEBRATION
WAS HELD THROUGHOUT
THE KINGDOM,

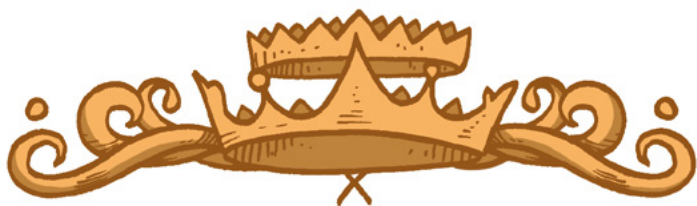


AND THE NEW PRINCESS ROZA
(FORMERLY LINDWORM), AND HER
BRAVE BRIDE KARI LIVED
HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

Goldie Locks

Story by Joanne Webster
Art by Isabelle Melançon





Goldie double-checked that her mask was securely on before entering the ballroom. She was grateful Maria managed to convince Lady Marigold to allow Goldie to go in her stead. Getting past the guards was far easier with an official invitation, even if it was rather well known that Lady Marigold would rather spend an evening in a haunted swamp than attend a party at King Bear's castle. Add to the mix that it was a masquerade, and that the guards had been given an "anonymous" gift earlier that evening of a crate of wine, and the result was that no one could be bothered to check who was who under each mask.

The break-in job Maria had given her was off to a splendid start. Saying no to Maria was like saying no to an angel. Maria was the kindest person Goldie knew and she was always glad to take on a job for her. Even if completing the job meant risking her life. King Bear would chop off her head if he knew Goldie was here.

Goldie gazed around the room as she attempted to locate the members of the Royal Bear family. As usual, the royal family would be the only ones wearing their crowns. It was highly discouraged to wear anything crown-like in the King and Queen's presence. Their crowns were their pride and theirs alone to wear. Goldie did think it was silly, but it certainly made it easier to spot them on the dance floor before sneaking into their chambers. Goldie was just thankful the Royal Bear family were humans as it is always harder to steal from elves or trolls, who had heightened sense of hearing and smell. Goldie always felt on edge around them, she swore sometimes they could tell she was a thief by her scent alone. Either way, those abilities made it harder to not be caught red-handed.

She recalled how the Troll Queen pursued her scent into the forest when she made the mistake of wearing her favorite perfume during a job. If Goldie hadn't found that griffon to ride, she would have been caught for sure!

It was admittedly hard to tell, given the elaborate costumes, just who was a real fairy, troll, satyr or elf, and which were simply costumes worn by human nobles. It seemed the Bears had not only invited every human nobleman and noblewoman in the country, but also the ambassadors of the many enchanted neighboring countries. With King Bear assuming they were about to obtain

control over Queen Maria's country, he and his Queen probably wagered they had a reason to celebrate.

Goldie had reached the refreshment table when a boisterous laugh echoed in her ears. She turned her head to see a large, brutish man. He was short, but his fists were as big as dinner plates, looking as if they could punch a hole through a tree trunk. His face was decorated by a thick beard and a very simple black mask. A giant, glittering crown sat atop his head, lost in a thick mound of dark and grey-streaked hair, clearly marking him as the Bear King.

He was laughing with one of the elves, his massive hand resting and almost crushing the frail being's shoulder. Now where are his Queen and the Prince? Goldie gazed around and saw the Queen hadn't ventured too far from her husband. She was taller, but her body was as round and plump as the King's. Goldie had heard rumors that the Queen's words were as merciless as the King's anger. The Queen's hands were as huge as the King's. Her hair was a dark brown and had been neatly pulled back into a bun held by several jeweled hair pins. She was off to the sidelines chatting with a couple of noblewomen. Her mask was more elaborate than the King's, and the shimmer of her crown matched her husband's.

Goldie surveyed the party looking for the Prince. She felt a light brush against her back and rapidly twirled to lock eyes with her target in question.

As the petticoat of her dress swished around her legs, Goldie quickly looked the prince over and had to admit Maria had been correct. The Prince was attractive, but had a rather small and unimposing frame compared to his parents. His hair was the same thick brown as the king and queen and provided needed padding for his heavy crown to rest, a tad crooked, on top of his head.

"Sorry!" said Prince Robert. Goldie was surprised to see he wasn't wearing a mask. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Goldie collected herself, startled by both the apology and the fact that he managed to sneak up on her, and curtsied. "It's fine, sire. I'm more than happy to be bumped into if it's by a member of royalty, especially a handsome one." She gave him her best flirty smile. "And even more so if that royal were to offer me a drink."

Prince Robert seemed baffled by her suggestion but gave a light chuckle. "I'll admit, I haven't heard that as a response before."

"May I ask why you aren't wearing a mask?"

Robert gave a half smile as he offered her a glass. "I hardly see the point of concealing my identity when my mother refuses to let me take my crown off. The evening would be much more pleasant without it. For one, the weight seems to be hindering my ability to dance or lean slightly towards guests."

"Ah," Goldie said as she eyed the crown. It would be so tempting to let it slip into her purse. "Doesn't look that heavy."

Robert fingered the crown as his bright green eyes dimmed and he gave a bitter frown. "It feels heavier when you consider the price that comes with it."

Goldie raised an eyebrow at the prince's weighted comment. She pretended to drink absent-mindedly.

"Who might you be?" Robert asked, as he took a tart. "Your voice doesn't sound familiar in the least."

Goldie grinned. "Now, what is the point of a masquerade if I tell you my name? You could guess or wait for the traditional Midnight Unmasking like everyone else."

"I doubt I could guess," Robert said as he pointed to her hair. "I don't know anyone whose hair is as golden and curly as yours."

Goldie proudly twirled a strand of her bright, wavy hair around her finger as she approached him. "Not many people in my country have this hair color, so it makes me unique. I like being unforgettable."

Goldie stepped forward and suddenly fell forward, pretending to trip on the hem of her dress. As she predicted, the gallant Prince swiftly caught her. "Are you alright?" he asked, holding her with both arms as his crown slid lopsided to the right.

"Yes, sorry," Goldie said as she gripped his side, pretending to regain her composure as her fingers discreetly slipped into his coat pocket. With great stealth, she slipped them out while calling attention to her feet. "Such annoying shoes," she said with an adorable pout, "they make my toes pinch."

"I see," Robert said. "Do you need to sit down?"

"Robert!" the King called out. "Come greet the Dwarf King's ambassador!"

Robert gave a tired sigh before he bowed to Goldie. "Excuse me, I'll only be a moment."

Goldie smiled as she watched him go to the King's side. Maria had been right. The Prince didn't seem to carry his father's ambition. He seems out of place in this grand ball. She turned her gaze away from Robert, and looked to the keys she now held. Goldie smiled, she had what she needed, so it was time for phase two. Goldie cautiously left the ballroom, and slipped into the the stairway.

According to the castle layout, the royal chambers were a couple of flights up. She grunted as she lifted the various layers of her skirt. From her sources, the King had hidden the spell books in one of the royal bedrooms. Goldie had no choice but to search them all. For that, she needed the prince's keys. The royal chambers were protected by an enchantment. Her trusty skeleton key would not be able to open those doors. She heard guards approaching. She slipped in a nearby closet and listened to the guards footsteps as they passed. Goldie then tore off the gown and bodice to reveal the plain dark tunic and trousers she had been wearing underneath. She replaced the decorative ballroom mask with a simpler black to keep her face hidden. Goldie then adjusted the belt

wrapped around her waist to ensure that both her pouch and her knife holster were set.

“Much better,” Goldie muttered as she tucked the glittering, charmed keys into her pouch. Goldie spotted the royal emblem crowning a large wooden door. She knew it had to be King Bear’s chambers. She plucked the heaviest of her magical keys and inserted it into the old iron lock. She gave a joyous grin as a soft click echoed as it turned. A shine appeared over the door and vanished, which was a signal that the spell that had been keeping her out was broken. The room was hers for the taking now. Goldie entered and cast her gaze about the room. It was exactly as she had expected. The walls were covered top to bottom in the animal skins and mounted heads of King Bear’s hunting prizes. Among the beastly decor he had hung several flattering ornate portraits of himself.

The drawers, bed canopy and even the mirrors were gold encrusted and had jewels sticking out of them like a jagged cave wall. Goldie was tempted to snag a jewel or two, but she was racing against the clock. Midnight was approaching. She began her search.

Goldie’s blood boiled at the thought of King Bear as she rummaged through his belonging. Not only had he secretly stolen Maria’s spellbook, but he was demanding that Maria cede the throne to him if she wished to keep her people safe from the rampage of the dragons. It was hard to believe those old spellbooks were the only thing keeping the nightmarish monsters out of her country. Goldie remembered the history lessons in school about how difficult it was to live under the constant threat of the dragons. The number of children eaten per year was particularly horrifying. Despite that, she wasn’t sure which was the worst beast for her country to deal with, the dragons or King Bear. Maria wasn’t ready to test if her country could survive without the spellbook. Hence why she had called her childhood friend, an expert thief, to her aid. Goldie would be declared a national hero for generations to come. She liked the idea, maybe they would even write a song or name a holiday after her.



Goldie checked every hiding spot she could think of, every drawer, closet and conceivable hidden compartment. She even lifted the mattress and checked underneath, but besides discovering the King slept on a bed that was as hard as a rock, she found no hint of the spellbook.

The Queen’s chambers were next on the list. No hunting trophies on her walls, but there were just as many portraits as the king’s room had heads. The portraits were encircled by layers of lace and velvet. In any spot where lace and velvet weren’t found, sat giant, ugly vases filled with blood-red roses. None of

this ornamentation, however, topped the gaudy miniature gold statue depicting the Queen herself sitting next to the vanity table

“Nice to see the country’s tax money is spent wisely,” Goldie muttered, as she flicked the statue’s forehead and continued her search.

Once again, she searched through the closet, drawers, tapped the walls and every other imaginable hiding spot. Besides discovering the the Queen’s bed was far too soft for her liking, her search yielded the same results as the King’s room.

The spellbook wasn’t here.

The spellbook had to be in Prince Robert’s room, it was the only logical conclusion. She glanced at the clock and saw she had less than an hour left . before the guests would be removing their masks.

She found Robert’s room. Goldie noted the Prince’s room was unembellished in comparison to his parents’ rooms. The bed had a simple design. Or at least as simple as a bed for royalty could be. There were gorgeous paintings of rivers and valleys, and a detailed map of the world hung on the far wall. There was no gold or jewelry in sight.

She didn’t know why she was glad to discover he was more practical, and Goldie didn’t have time to decipher why she cared. Just as in the previous rooms, Goldie was thorough. She searched the drawers, closet and every trunk in the room. Desperate, she let out a curse as she sat in the large chair. Where on earth could they have hidden it?

She drummed her fingers on the armchair’s cushion. The book was large, so it had to be hidden in something fairly noticeable. Goldie leaned back. The back of the chair was oddly lumpy.

The King’s chair had been as hard as a slab of stone, while the Queen’s had been too soft; Goldie had been certain she would be sucked in, and never seen again. But no, the Prince’s chair was just right, except for that odd spot directly in the middle of her back.

Goldie stood up and traced her fingers over where the cushion felt hard. She grinned as she realized her fingers were moving in a rectangular shape. Goldie drew the knife from her holster and sliced the edge of the panel to easily slip her hand inside. She held back gleeful laughter as she removed the fabric, unveiling an old book with a cover engraved with ancient lettering.

“Found it,” Goldie said as she held up the book. “This was too easy.”

“I agree.”

Goldie spun around, clutching the book to her chest. A blow knocked her knife away. She protectively held onto the book as Robert kicked the knife under his bed and turned to her with a frown.

“I thought I might find you here,” he said as his eyes narrowed. “When I couldn’t find you at the party.”

“You looked for me, did you?” Goldie said with a small grin, doing her best to hide the sudden dread that she had been caught. He was suspicious from the start? She really need to work on her disguises more.

“Yes, because it’s midnight,” Robert said as he approached her. “So, it’s time to remove your mask.”

Goldie tried to dodge, but the Prince was surprisingly fast and ripped her mask away. She narrowed her eyes as Robert stepped back and looked her over. “I know you,” he said. “I saw your wanted poster back when I was staying in the Eastern Islands last summer.”

“Oh?” Goldie said. “And who am I?”

“Goldie Locks,” Robert said as he twirled her mask in his hands. “The famous thief, rumoured to be the adoptive sister to Queen Maria.”

“You forgot THE most beautiful maiden in the land,” Goldie said with a laugh. “I won’t deny being a thief, but,” she gave a shrug. “I assure you, that the rumour about the Queen is false. I’m hardly that important.”

“If it is,” Robert said as he pointed to the book in hand. “Why did you sneak in here to steal that book? It would hold little value to anyone other than her.”

Goldie raised a finger. “To sell it back to the queen perhaps? Or to your father? Stealing something stolen is hardly stealing. It’s more like distributing the wealth.” she dropped her smile, and stared accusingly at Robert. “After all, wealth is what you expected to gain when your family stole it from Queen Maria. To force her to hand her country over to you on a silver platter.”

Robert went quiet, his hands tightened into fists. “That has nothing to do with me, that was my father.” He looked up solemnly. “I told him it’s vile to take over a country like that.”

“And yet, you did nothing to stop him.” She narrowed her eyes. “Words are meaningless if there’s no action to go with them.” Oh, that was good! She should save that for a book someday.

Robert seemed hesitant as he stared at the book. “I don’t agree with what my father is doing.”

“Then why was the book hidden in your room?” Goldie said as she pointed to the chair.

Robert looked down. “I took it. I was hoping to conceal for a while. Talk some sense into him. To change his mind...” He removed his crown and let it roll on his bed.

Goldie frowned. Robert didn’t seem to be lying. “Perhaps you were tired of waiting for your kingdom and thought you’d use the spells in the book to claim both Queen Maria’s and the Bear kingdom as your own?”

Robert’s eyes widened. “Is that what you think of me!” he shouted. “I hate this,” he muttered.

“Then don’t stop me,” Goldie replied sharply as she pointed to the window



behind him that she had hoped to use to escape. It would be too risky to go back the way she came with the book in her hands. “Walk away, and pretend you didn’t see me.”

“I can’t,” Robert replied as Goldie drew closer to him. “I don’t agree with my father, but I can’t betray him.”

Goldie gave him a sincere smile. The guy was loyal, the same way she was to Maria, and she couldn’t deny it was an admirable trait. “Don’t worry,” she said as she reached inside her pouch and brought out a tiny sack filled with powder. “You wouldn’t be betraying anyone if you suddenly went to sleep.”

Robert scoffed. “I’m hardly going to go to sleep-”

Goldie flung the sack towards his chest. It broke on impact, flooding his lungs with sleeping powder. Robert coughed uncontrollably and leaned on the bed. His crown dropped to the floor. Robert staggered, unable to stay conscious, and landed on the floor next to the crown. Once quiet snores could be heard, Goldie rose and walked towards the window. “And I was hoping to not have to buy more of Rose’s sleeping powder when I got back.”

Standing in the window frame, she looked back at the slumbering Prince. She brushed her curls out of her eyes and grunted.

“I’m getting soft.” Goldie walked back to the prince and flopped him onto his bed. Why did the Prince have to be so heavy? “There, at least you’re off the floor.” She laughed as she felt the mattress. “Glad to see you have better taste in beds than your parents.” She stared at his sleeping face for a moment before placing her mask in his hands.

Goldie headed to the window and blew a kiss to the sleeping prince. “See you around, Robert! Got to admit, I do like you, but that’s my secret,” she admitted before climbing out the window.



Queen Maria thanked her maid for serving the tea, and then turned her attention back to Goldie. “So, how did you get out? Winged shoes? Enchanted beanstalks?”

“Just the usual, used my grappling hook, and climbed down the castle wall,” Goldie shrugged as she stuffed a scone into her mouth. “Then while the guards were busy getting drunk, thanks to the wine I bribed them with, found a horse that was in desperate need of liberation, and was out of there before anyone noticed.”

Maria fiddled her hands nervously. “And where’s the book?”

Goldie smirked as she revealed the book she’d been keeping behind her back. “Here! An early birthday present.”

Maria sighed with relief as she took the book, and flipped through the pages. “Goldie, I’m in your debt.”

“You’re darn right,” Goldie said as she hung her legs over the chair arm, and sipped her tea. “You have no idea what a pain in the butt it was to get it back.”

Maria only laughed, as she set the book on the table. “And how should I pay you?”

Goldie traced her finger over the brim of her cup. Normally, a job like this would be double her rate, but it was Maria. “Nothing.”

Maria rolled her eyes. “Goldie, if you think you’re getting away without me properly thanking you, forget it.”

Goldie sighed. “Fine, give me a bag of gold, a three-layer chocolate cake, a national holiday and we’re even.”

“With tea, I’m assuming?”

Goldie snorted. “Of course with tea, it’d be barbaric to have cake and no tea.”

Maria chuckled as she folded her hands into her lap. “And you’re certain only Prince Robert saw you?”

Goldie nodded, grimly. “Yeah, so I’m betting we’ll be getting an angry letter from King Bear demanding you hand me over when the Prince tells him.”

“I don’t believe that will be a problem,” Maria said as she leaned forward as a mischievous smirk appeared. “Funny thing, I did receive a couple of letters, but not from King Bear.”

Goldie sat up straight as Maria brought out two letters from her skirt pocket. “They are both from Prince Robert,” Maria explained. “The first one is addressed to me, he humbly apologizes for what his father has done, and has asked if he may come personally to make amends. Also, apparently he kept the fact that he saw you steal the book a secret.”

Goldie scoffed. “He’s probably doing that to cover his butt, so you don’t decide to declare war on them for stealing your book.”

“Perhaps,” Maria replied, and handed the second letter over. “However, this one is addressed to you, my dear.”

Goldie choked on her tea, as she took the letter, and broke the seal.

Dear Goldie,

I wanted you to know that I will no longer let my parents dictate my life. I’m going to start to act like a proper ruler to my country. I’m working with my council, and with the citizens to officially and properly take the crown away from my father. It will take time, but thankfully both my people and the council have had enough with my father’s selfish actions.

Some time in the future, I will be coming to your homeland to make amends to Queen Maria and would like to get you know you better.

Sincerely, Prince Robert

P.S. I was half awake when you blew me that kiss.

Goldie’s jaw dropped. The little sneak saw that?! she thought.

“Well,” Maria said. “What does it say?”

Goldie tried desperately to hide her blush and folded the letter. “It’s nothing.”

“You are lying,” Maria said as she swiped the letter back.

“Hey! That’s private correspondence!”

“I am the Queen, I get my way,” Maria said as she stuck out her tongue before her eyes skimmed the letter, grinning. “Oh my.” She laughed. “It looks like he was quite taken by you.”

Goldie sighed as she sipped her tea. “I can’t see why? I knocked him out and stole the book under his nose.”

Maria leaned back in her chair. “You don’t realize it, Goldie, but your words have a powerful effect on people.”

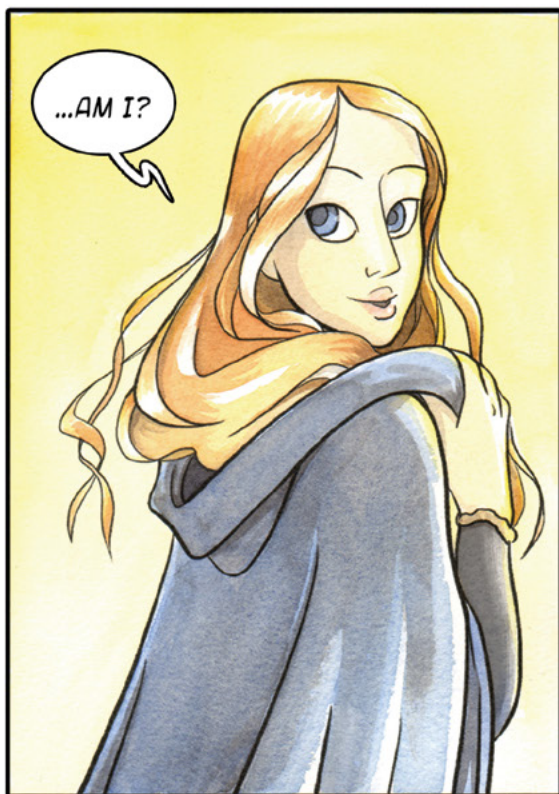
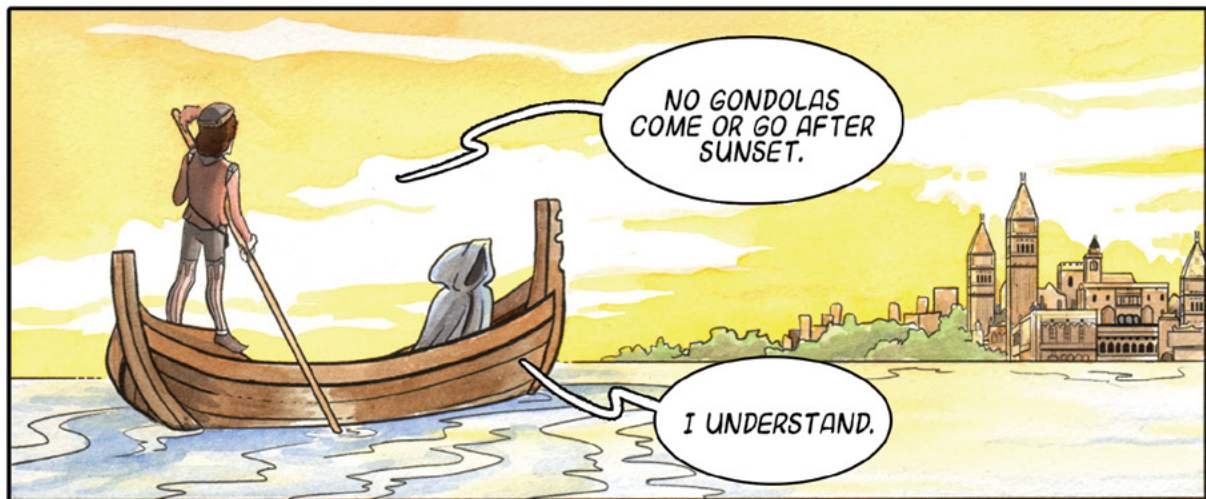
Goldie gave her friend a little smile. Perhaps she would attempt to steal his heart next. And this time, he would not be able to catch her doing it.

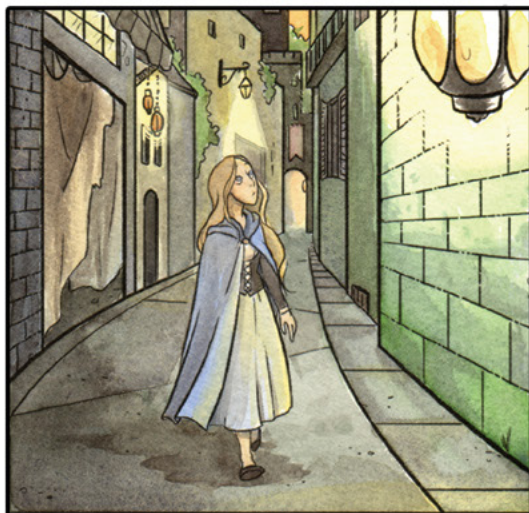
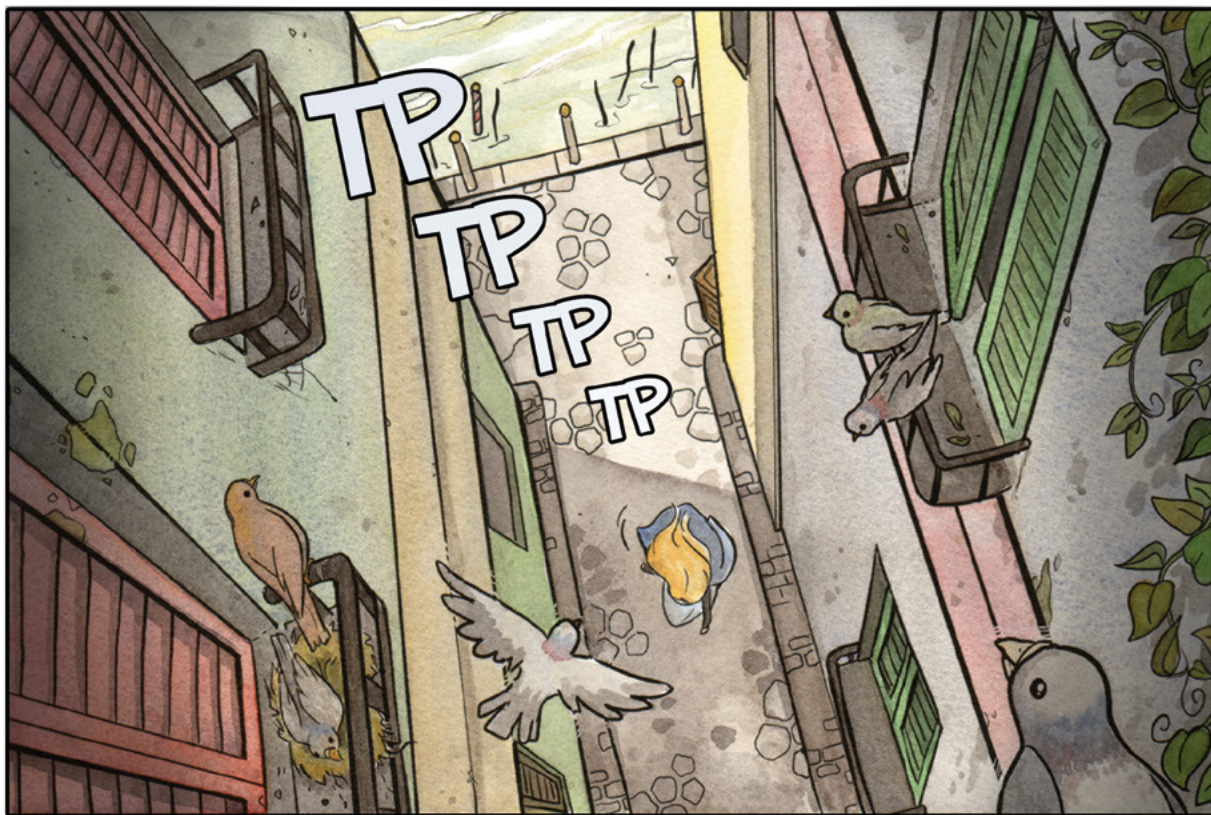
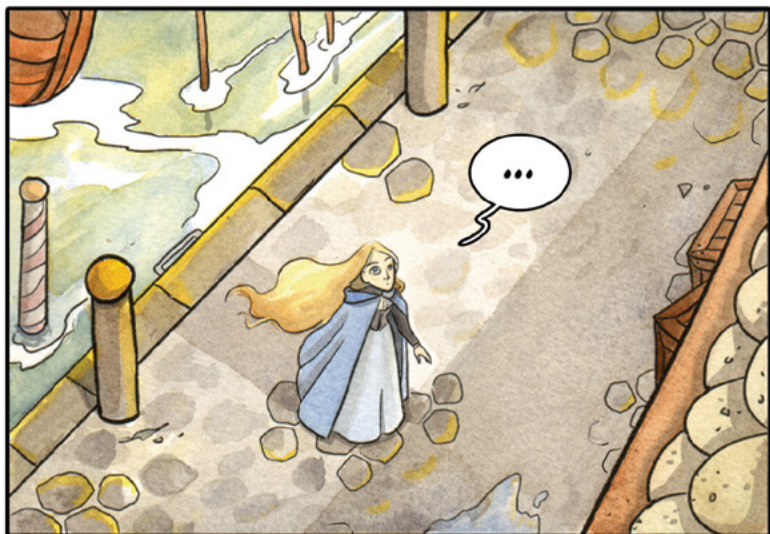


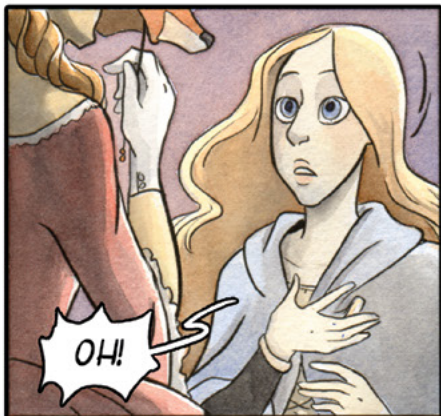
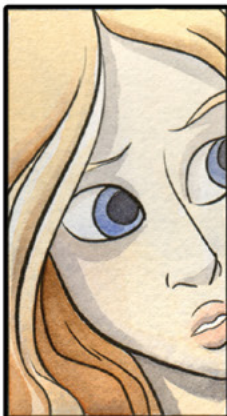
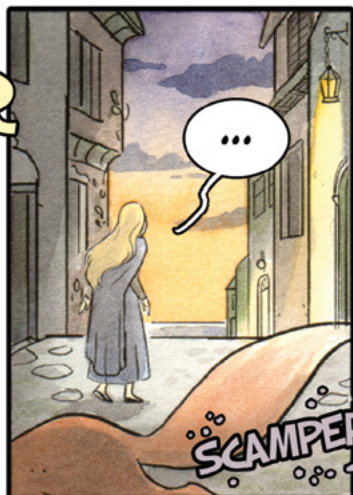
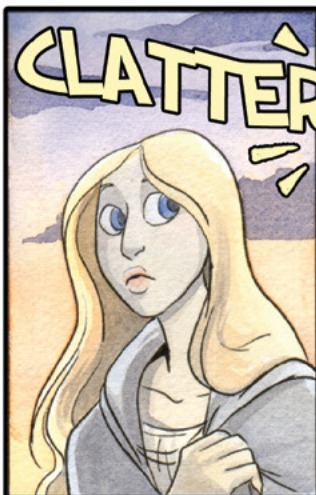
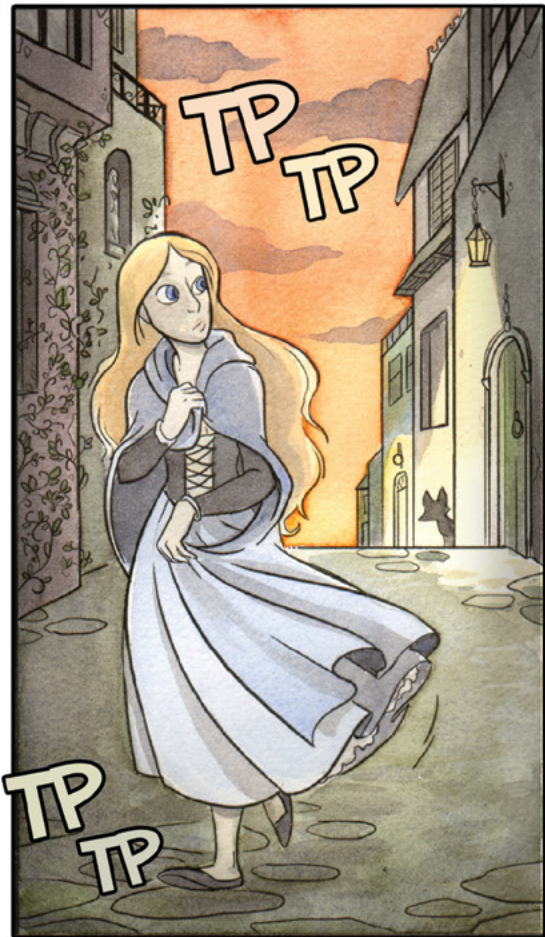
MASKS

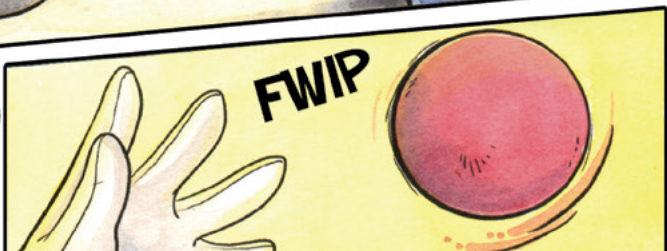
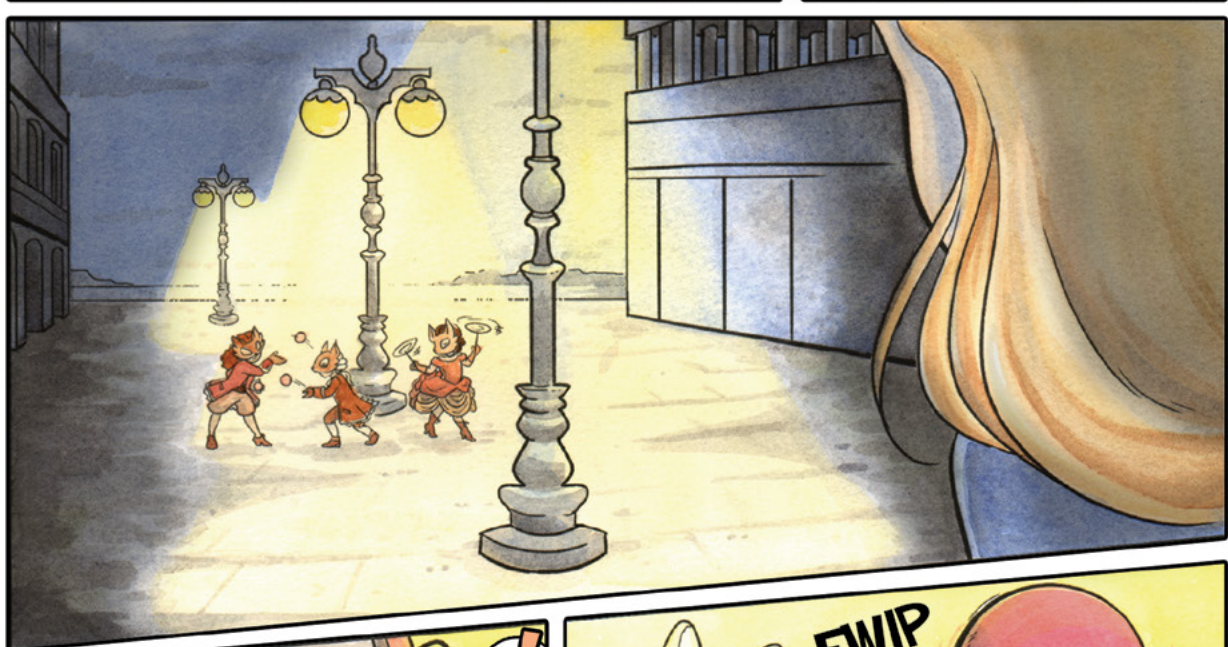
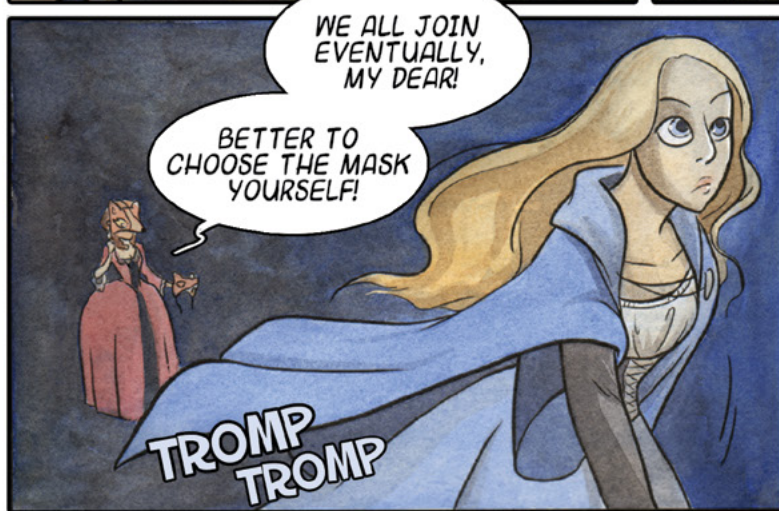
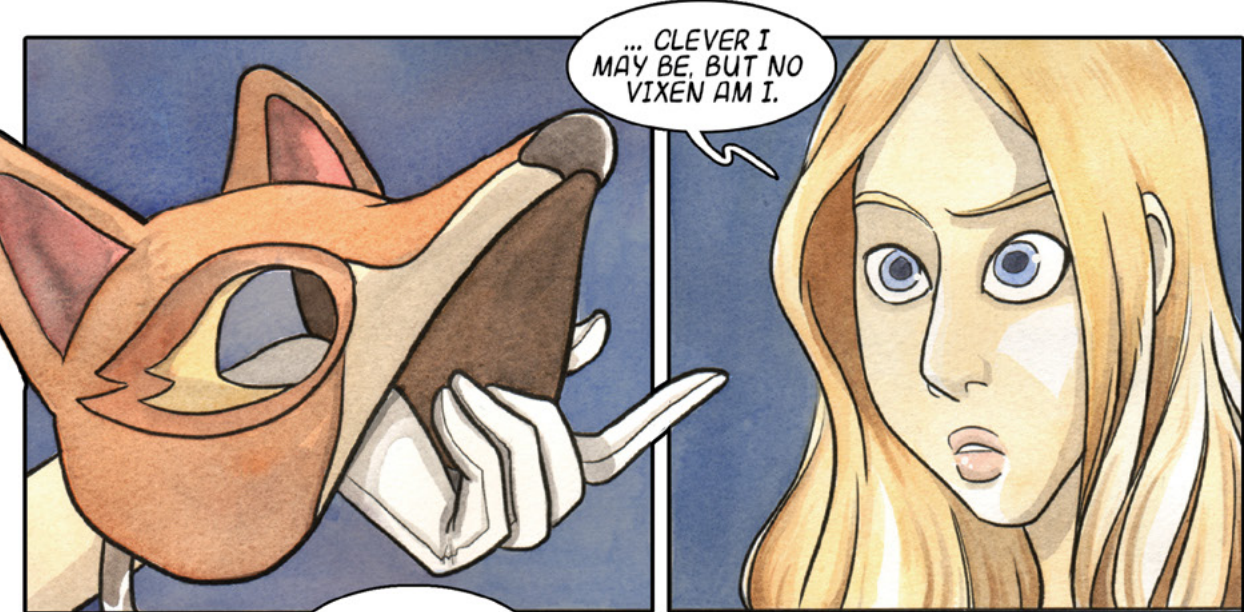


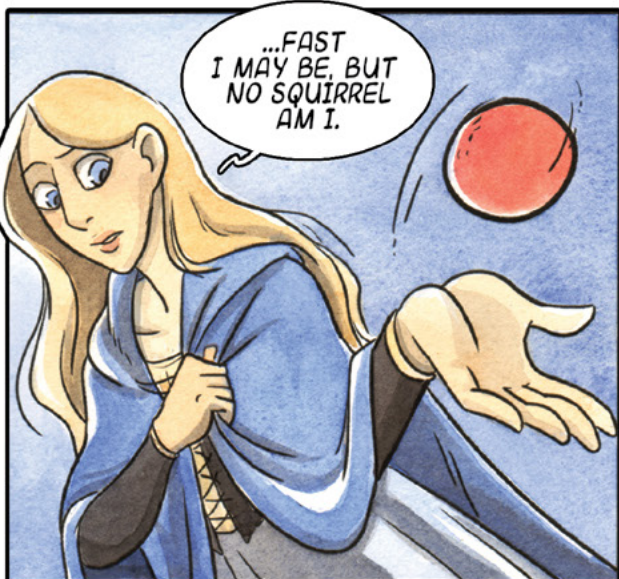
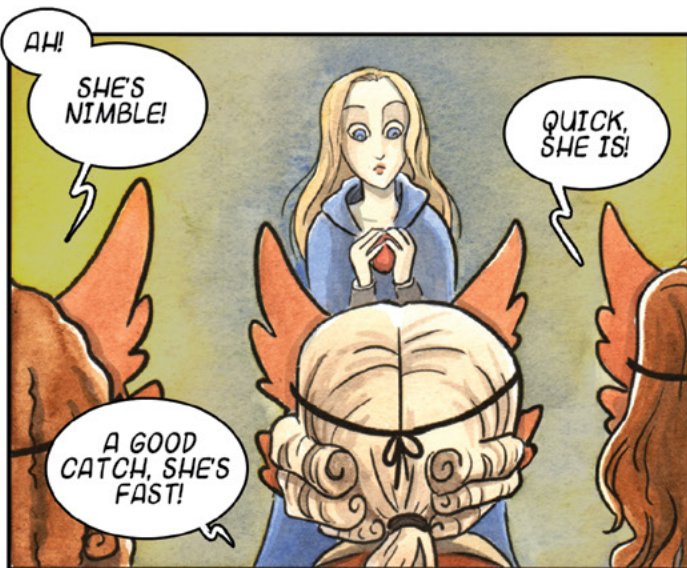
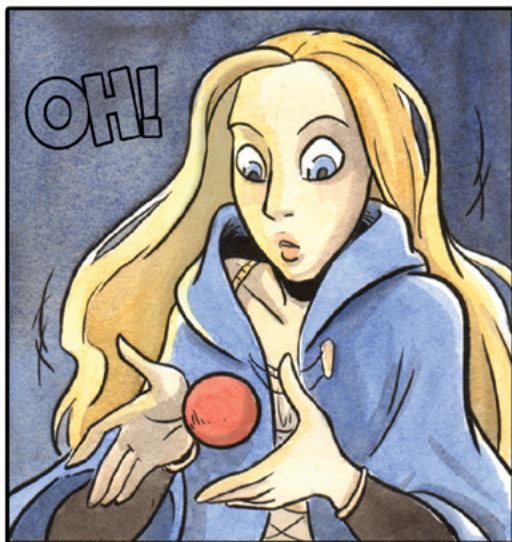
STORY & ART BY MEGAN KEARNEY

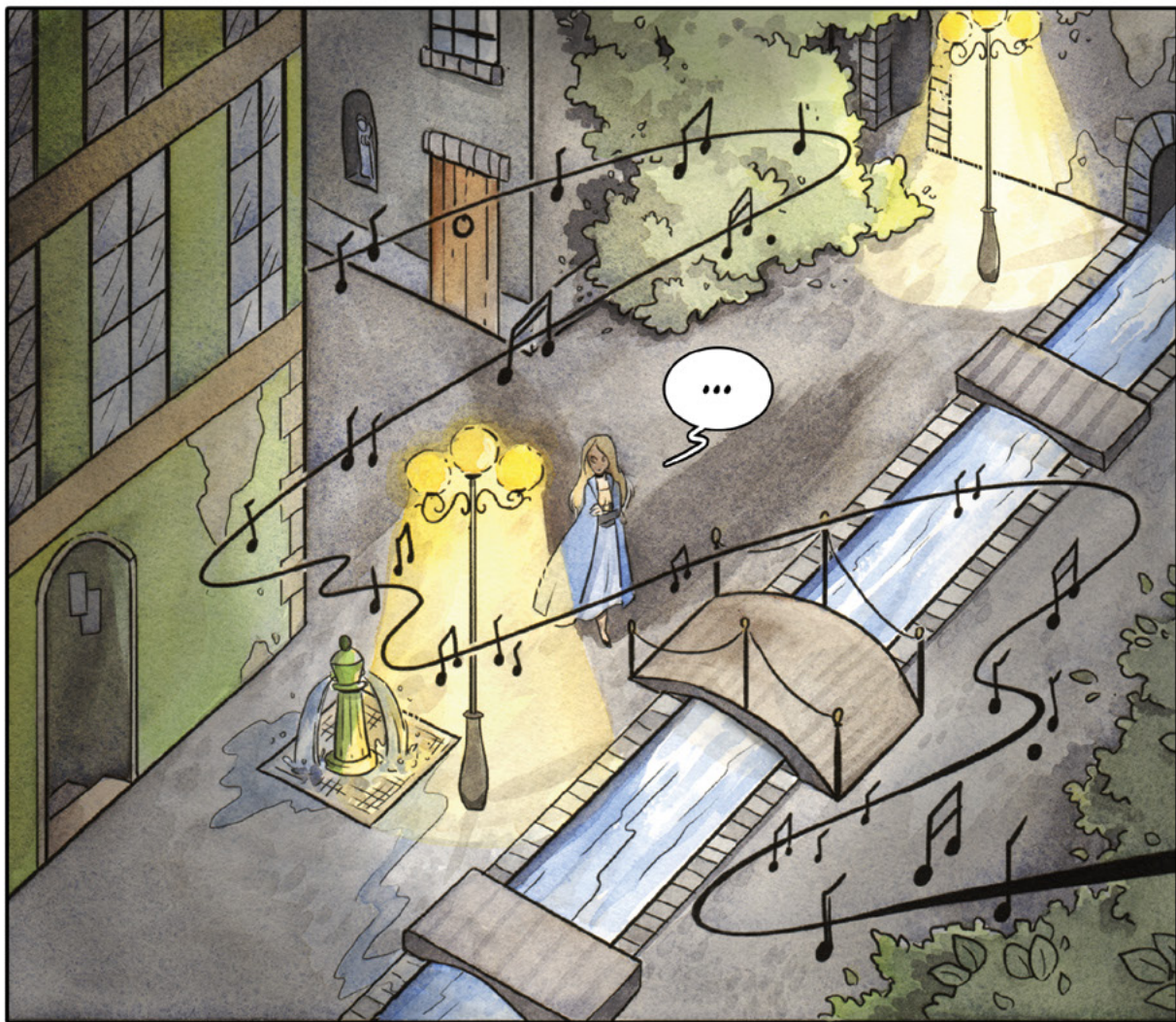


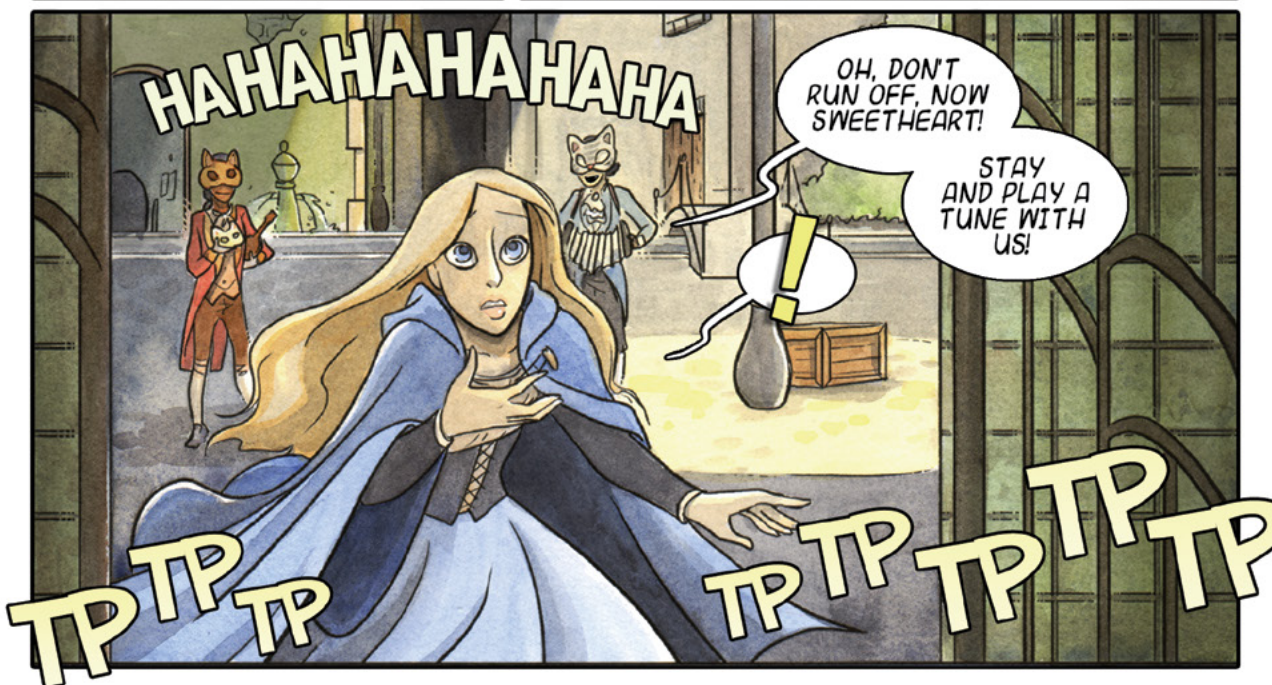
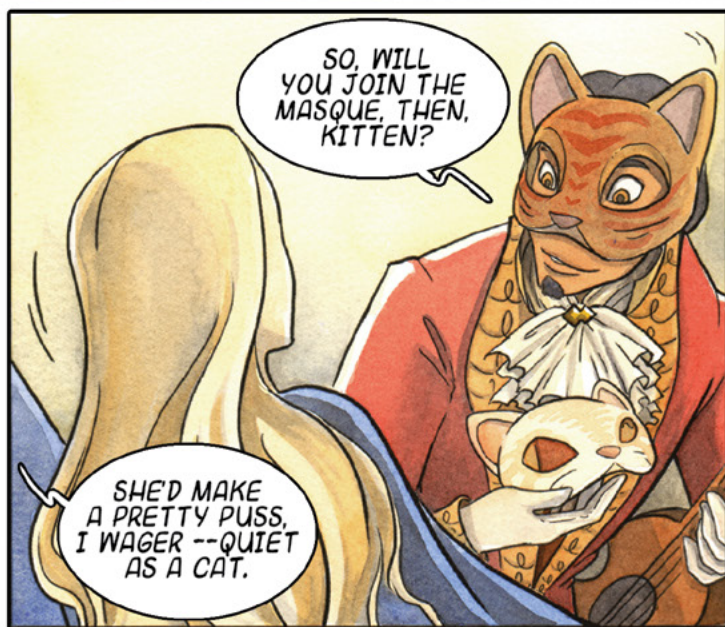
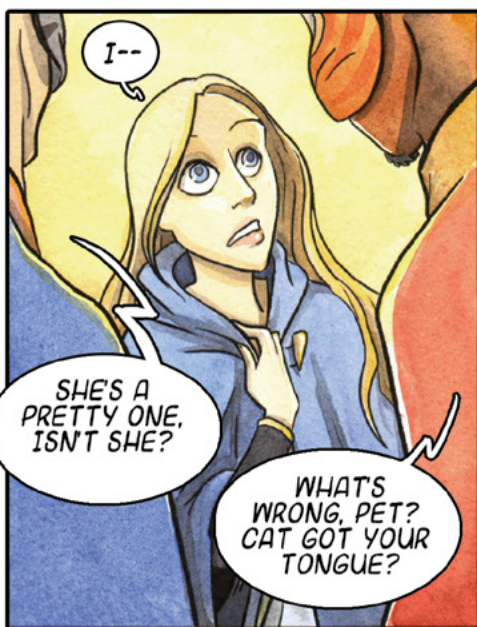
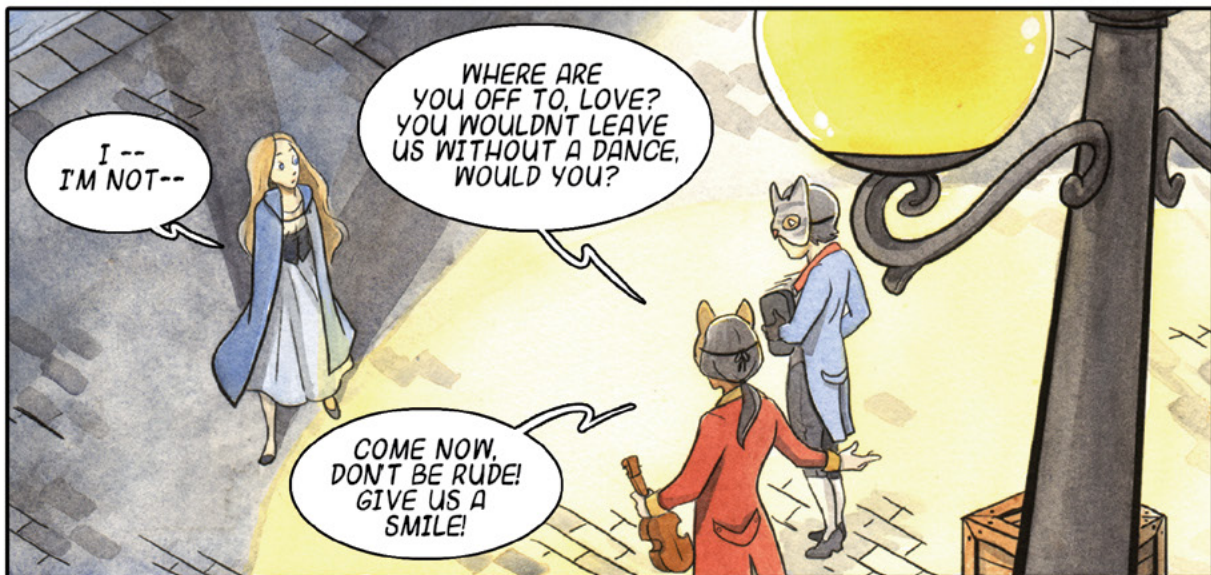


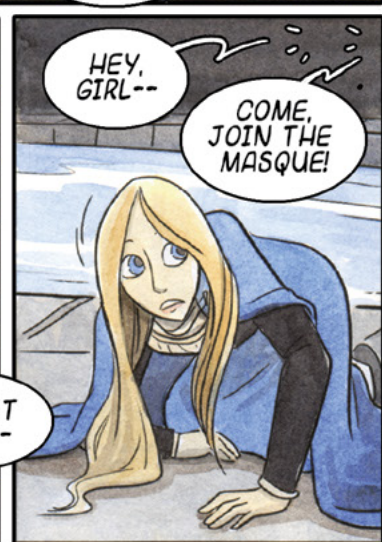
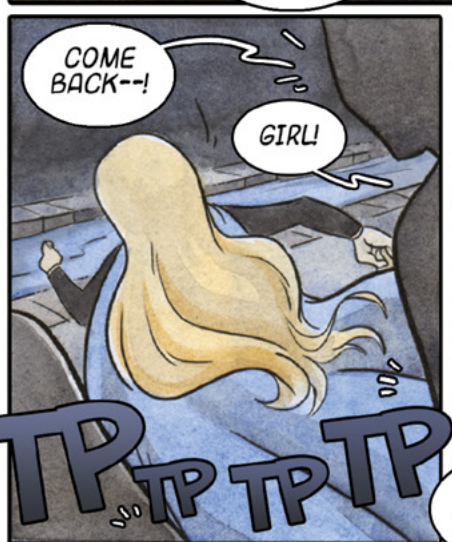
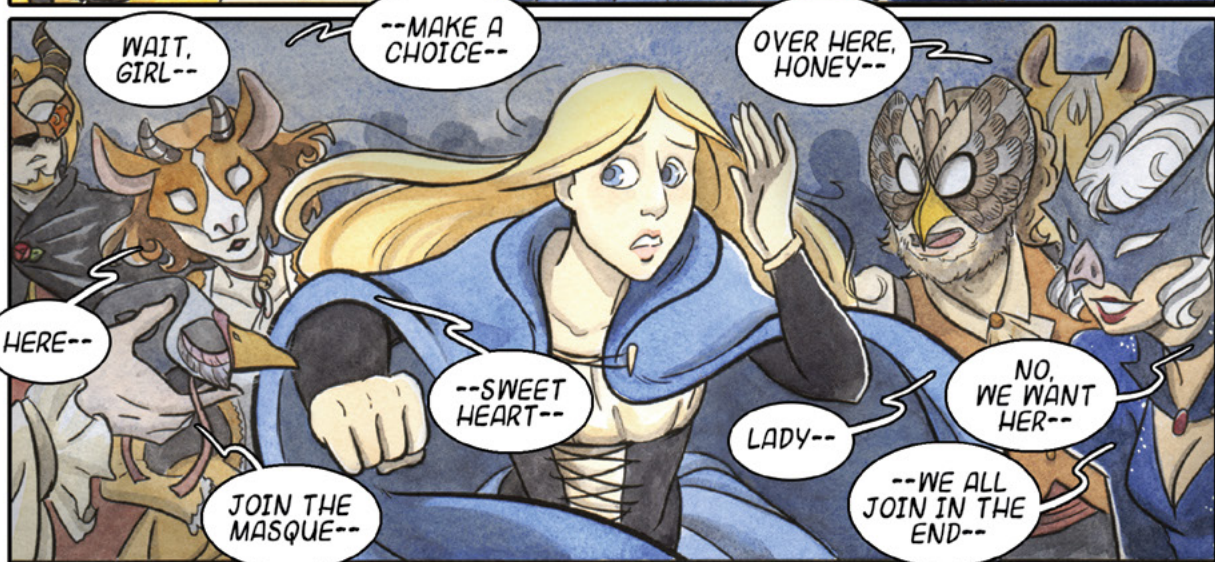
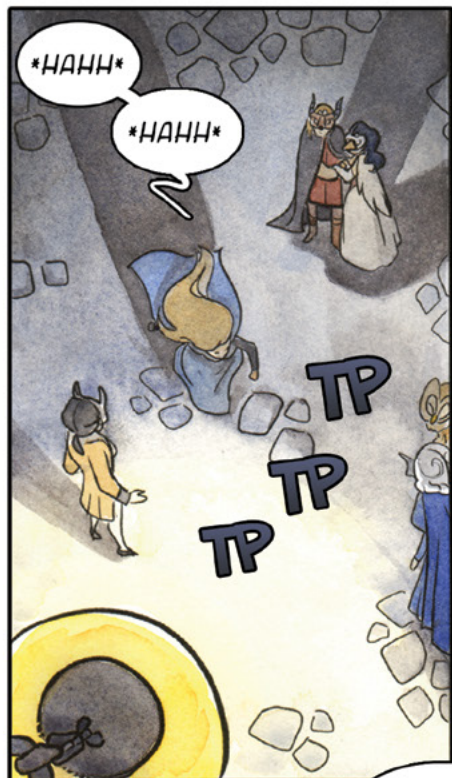


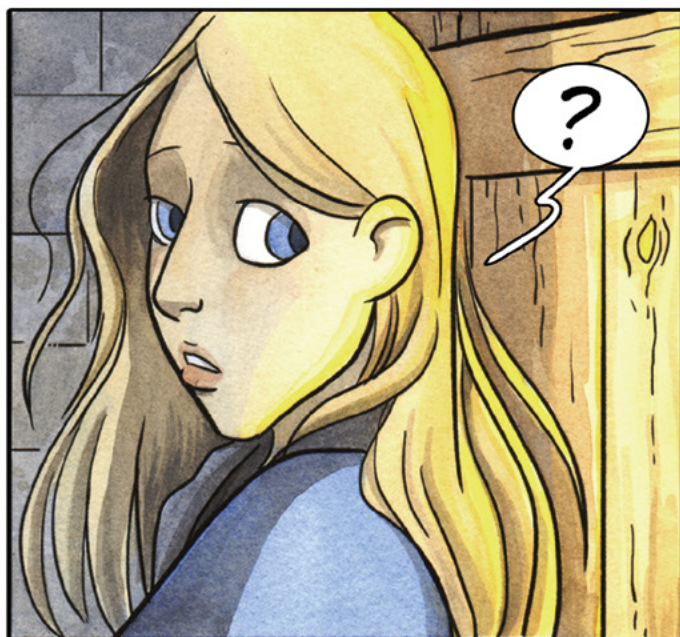
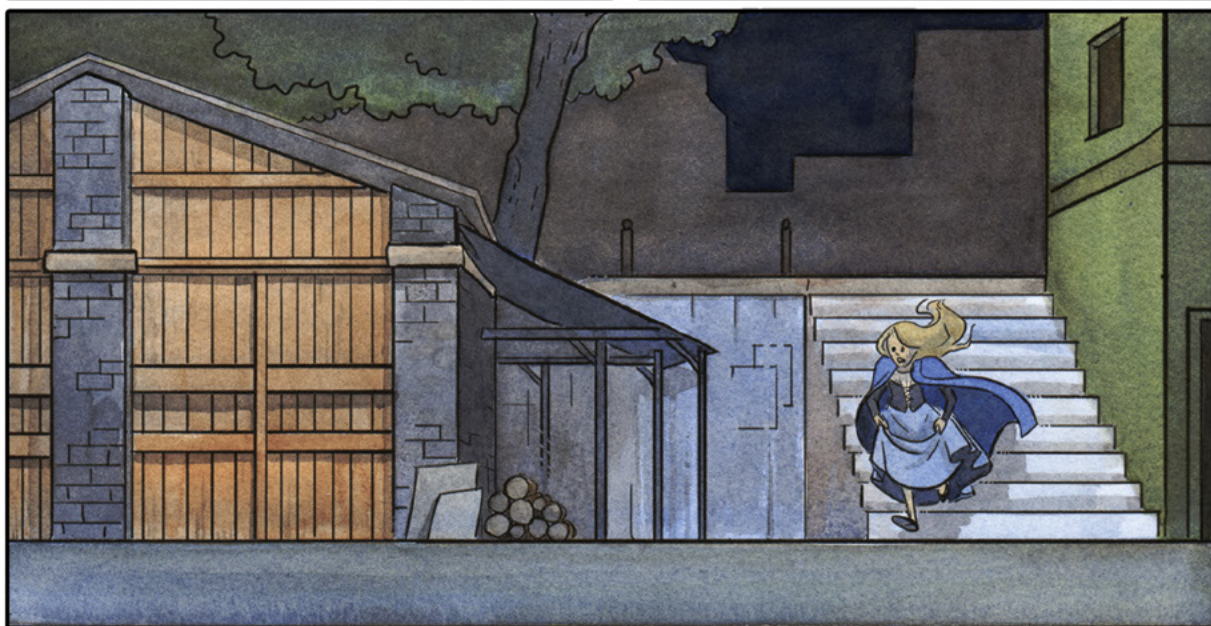
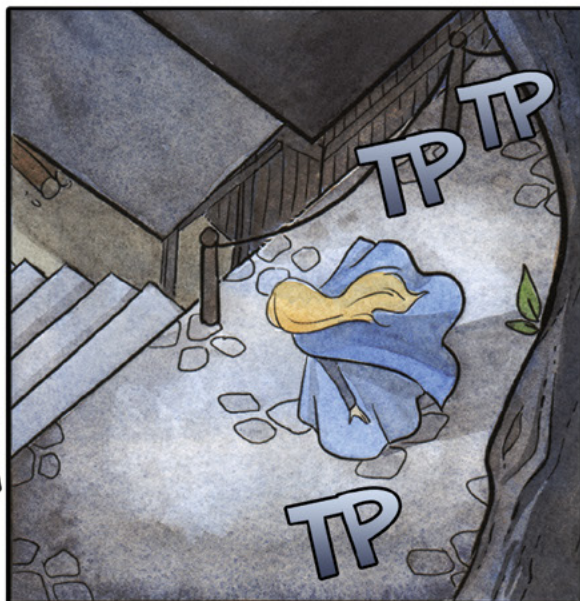
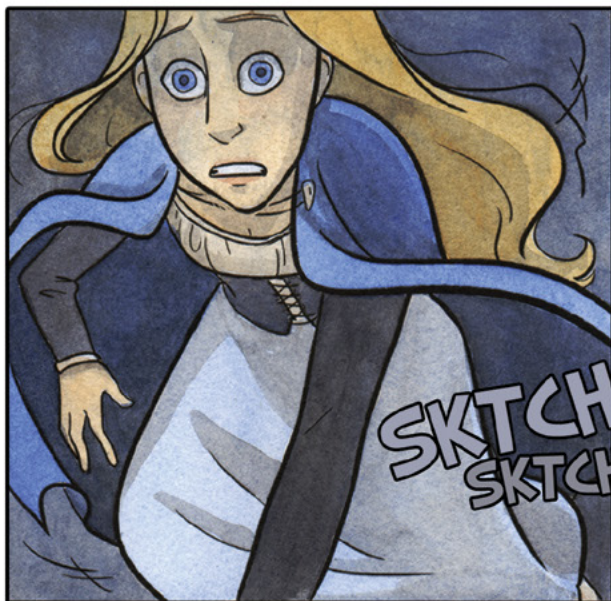


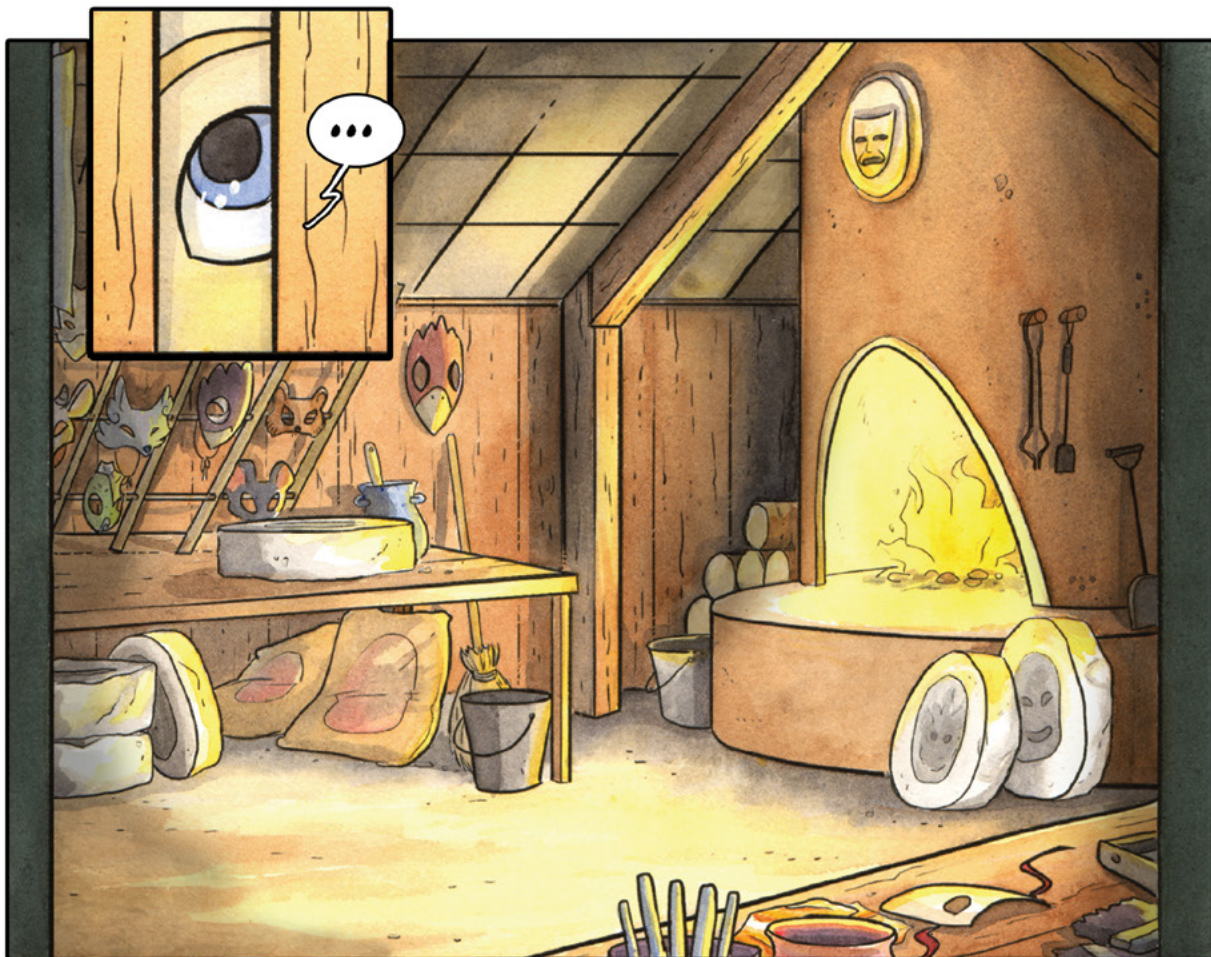


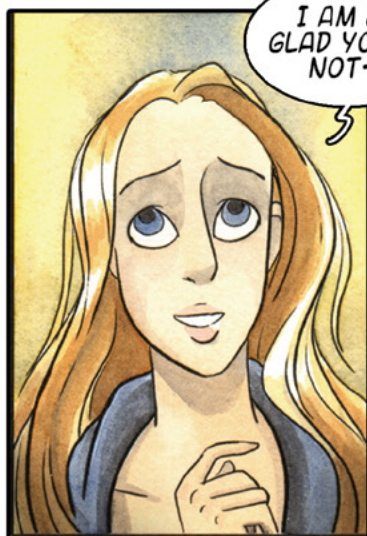
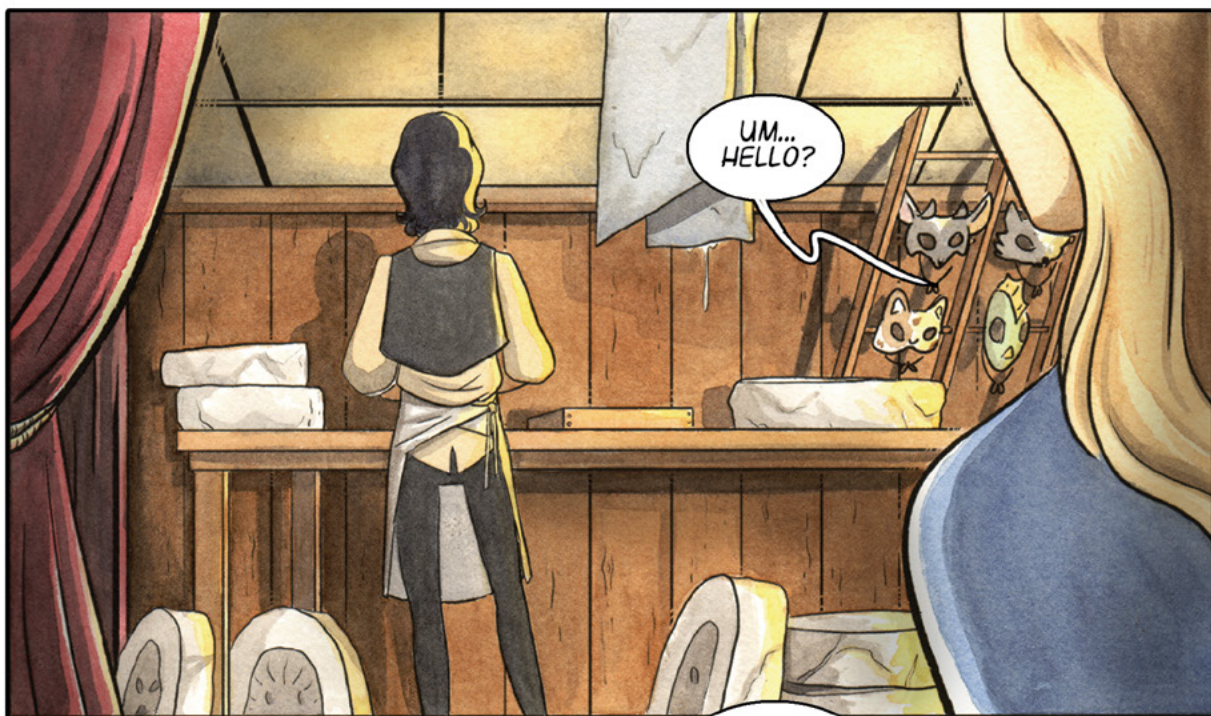












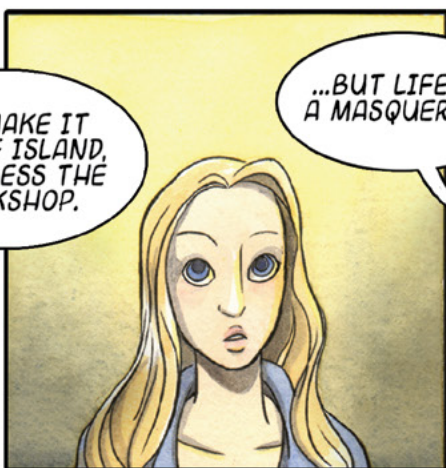


...YOU'VE DONE
WELL TO COME
SO FAR.

IT TAKES
BRAVERY AND
CUNNING TO GO
SO LONG WITHOUT
HIDING YOUR
TRUE FACE...

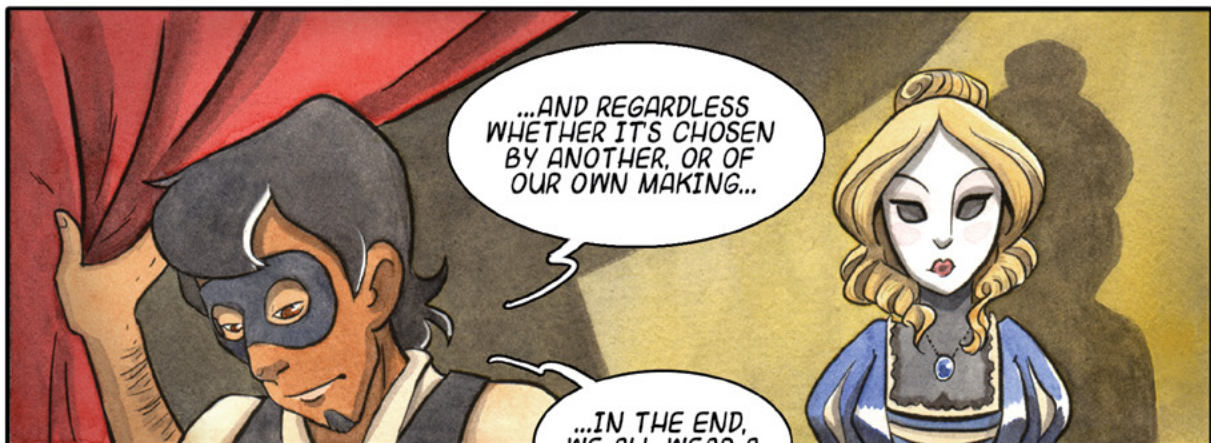
FEW MAKE IT
TO THE ISLAND.
MUCH LESS THE
WORKSHOP.

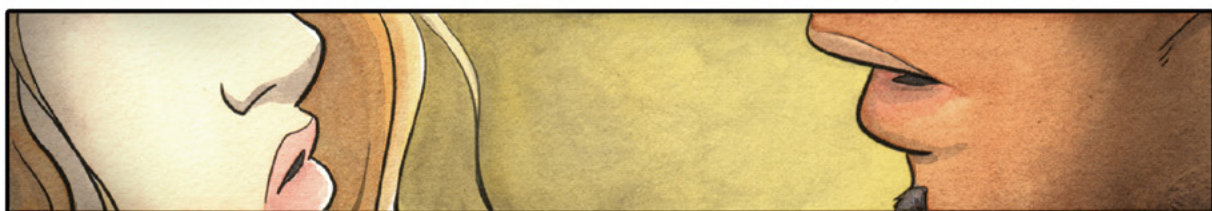
...BUT LIFE IS
A MASQUERADE.

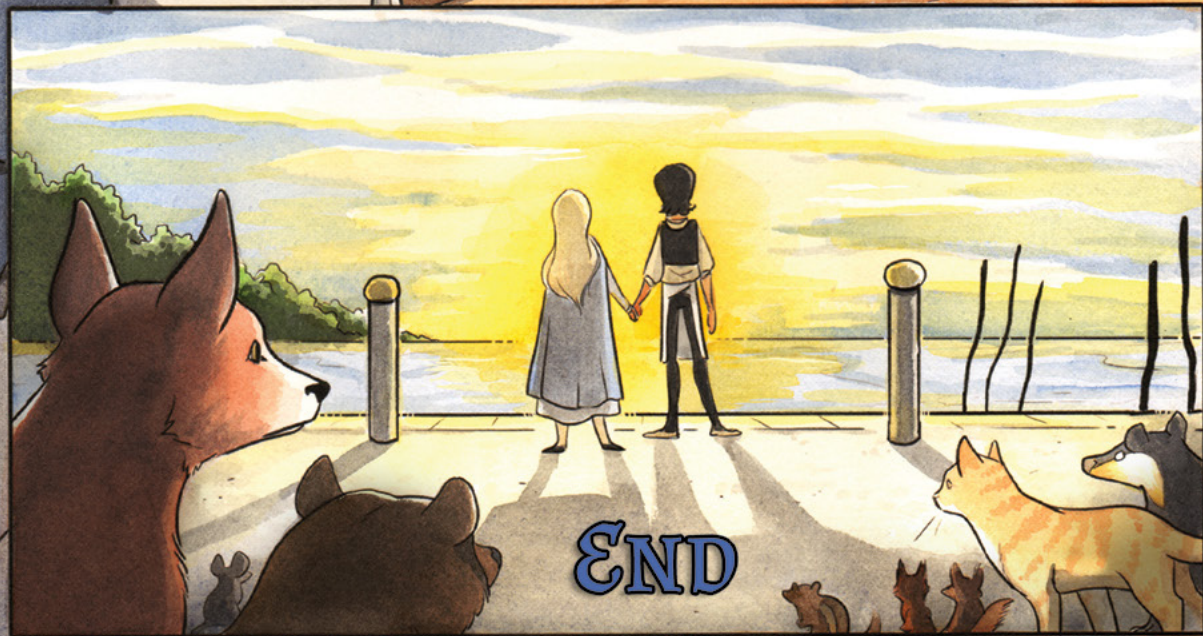
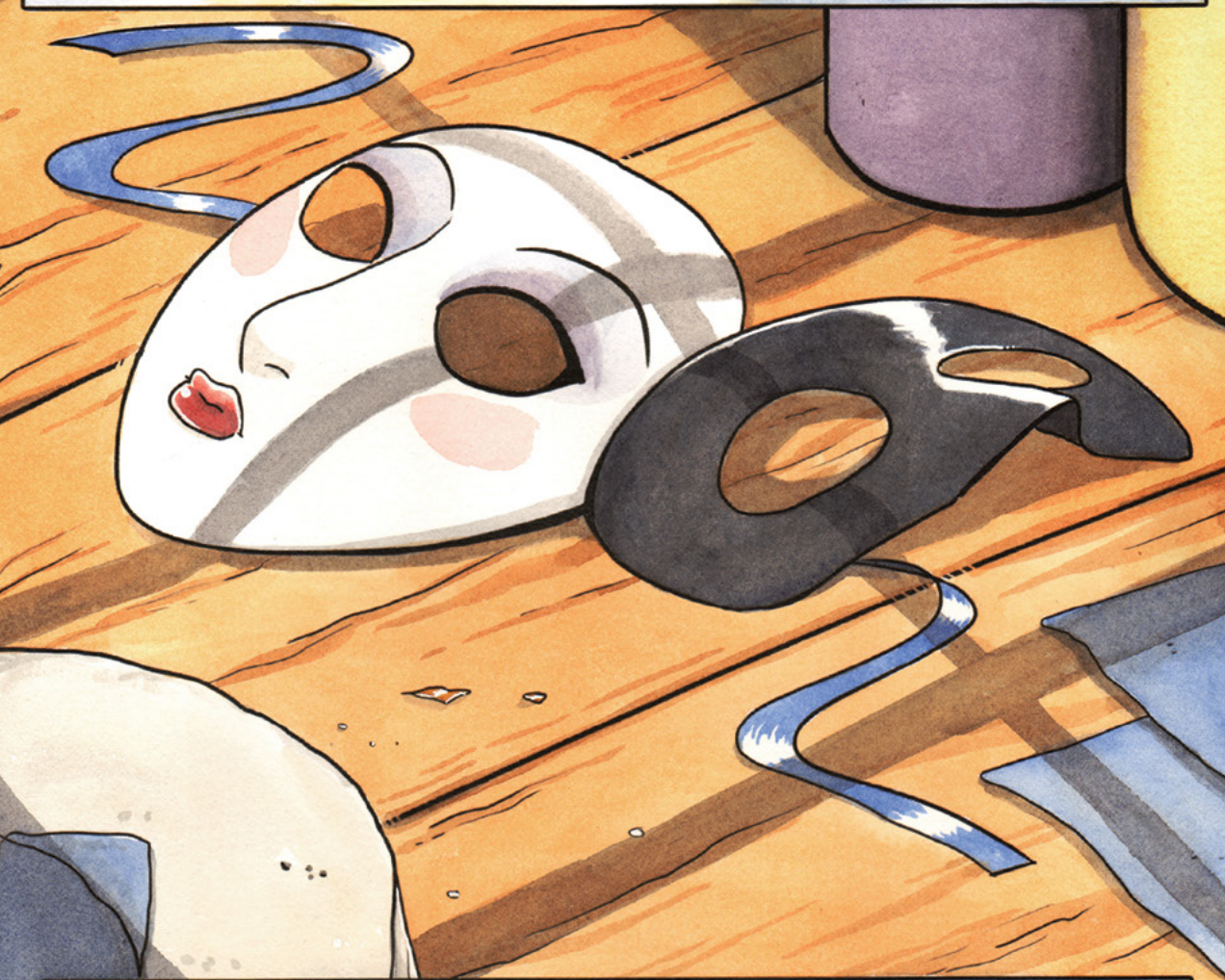


WE WEAR
MASKS EVERY DAY.
SOME ARE MORE
HONEST THAN
OTHERS.

SHFF



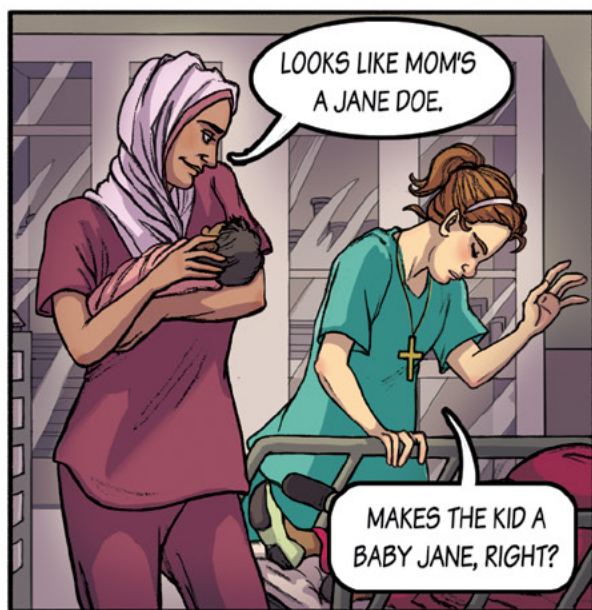




Godfather Death

LAURA NEUBERT







I GAVE MY
GODDAUGHTER LITTLE.

WHAT SHE HAD,
SHE WORKED FOR.



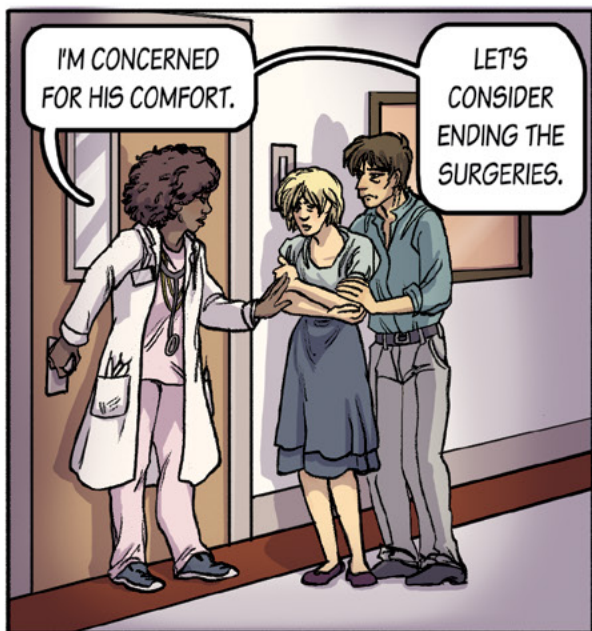
BUT I DID
GRANT HER ONE
POWERFUL GIFT.

TO KNOW WITH A
GLANCE HOW MUCH LIFE
A SOUL HAD LEFT.



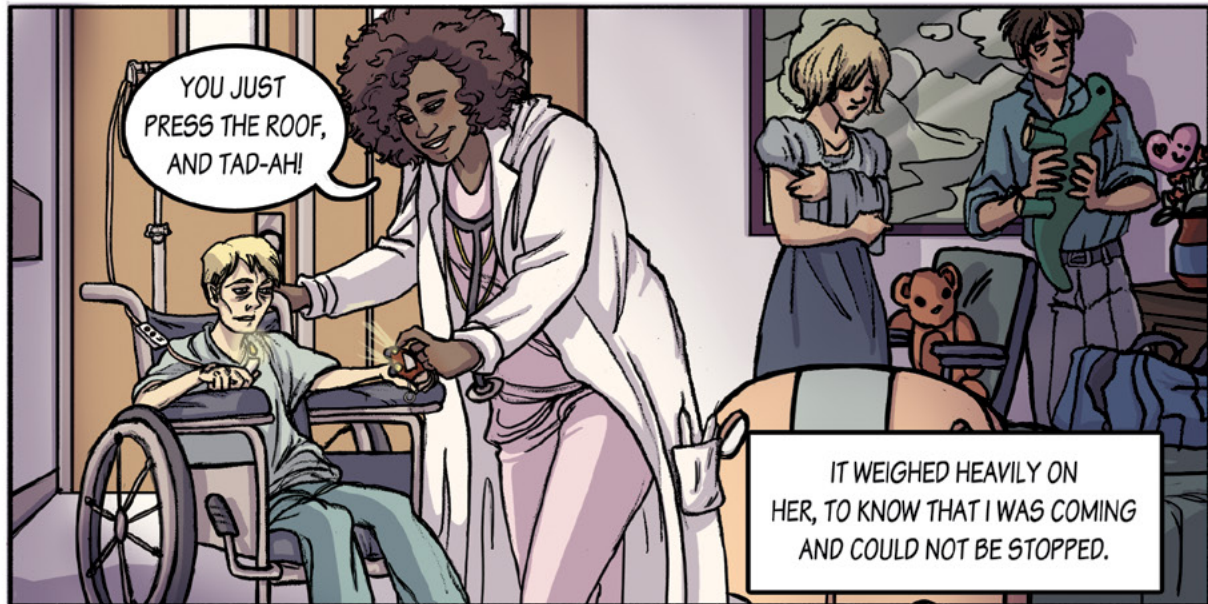
DO YOU THINK I'LL
MAKE IT TO KEN'S
WEDDING, DR. ROSSI?

AH SUGAR,
YOU'RE GOING
TO OUTLIVE ME!



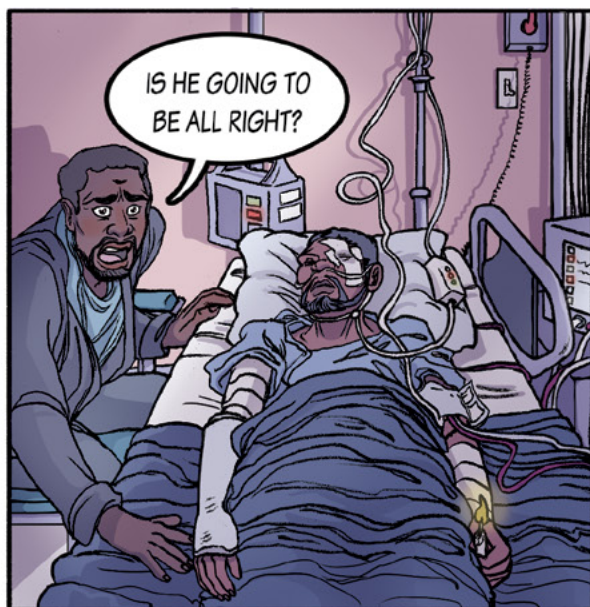
I'M CONCERNED
FOR HIS COMFORT.

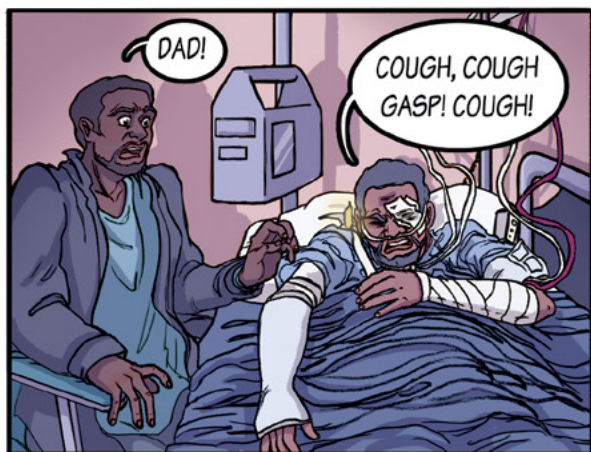
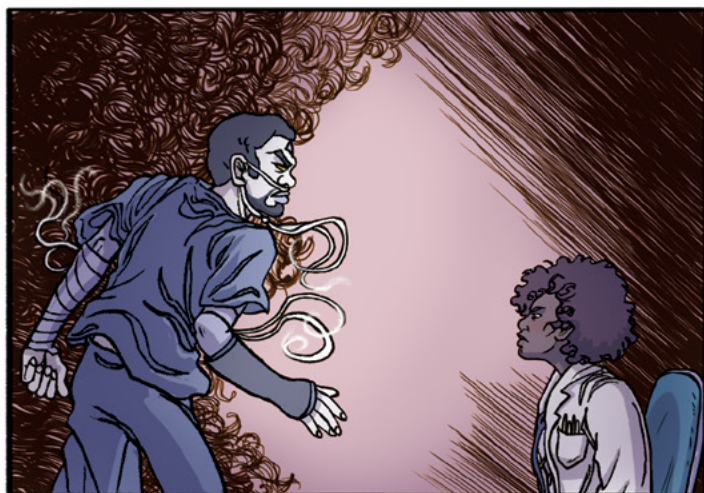
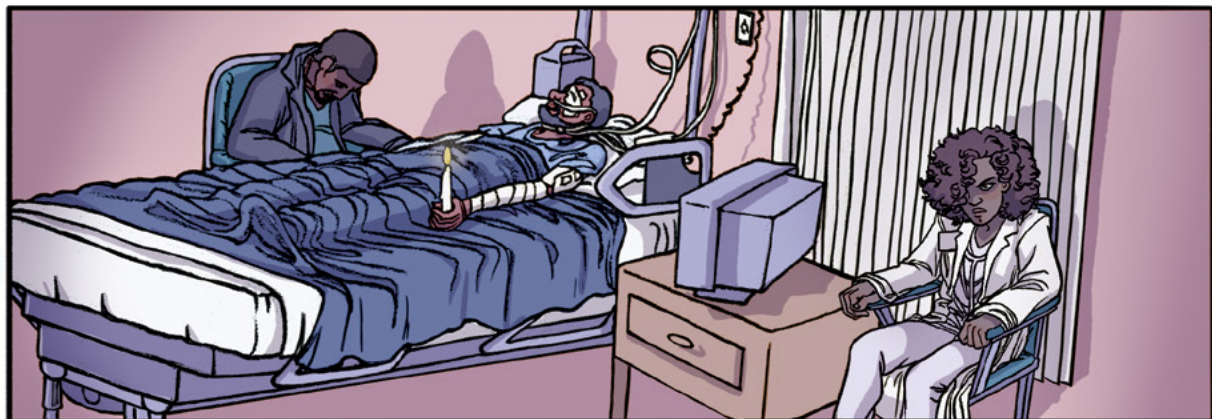
LET'S
CONSIDER
ENDING THE
SURGERIES.

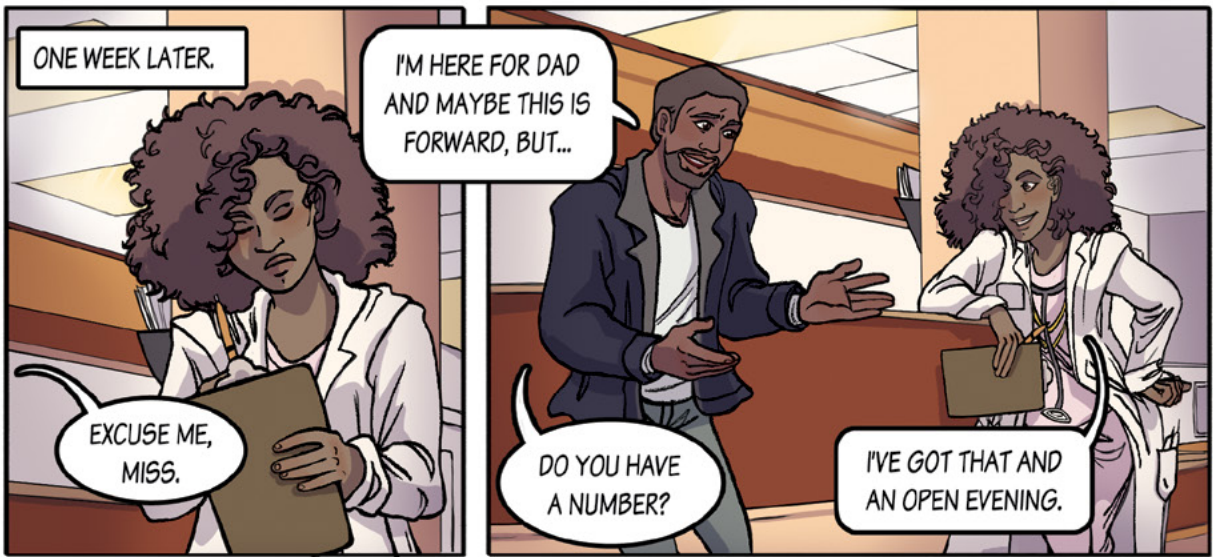


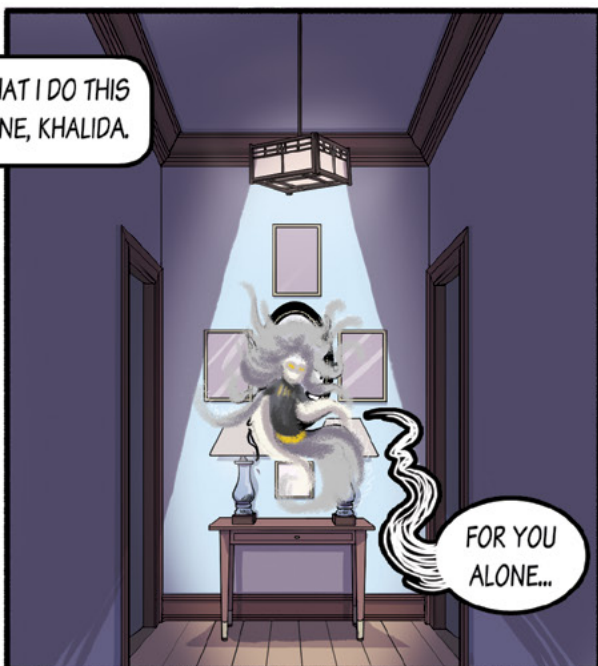
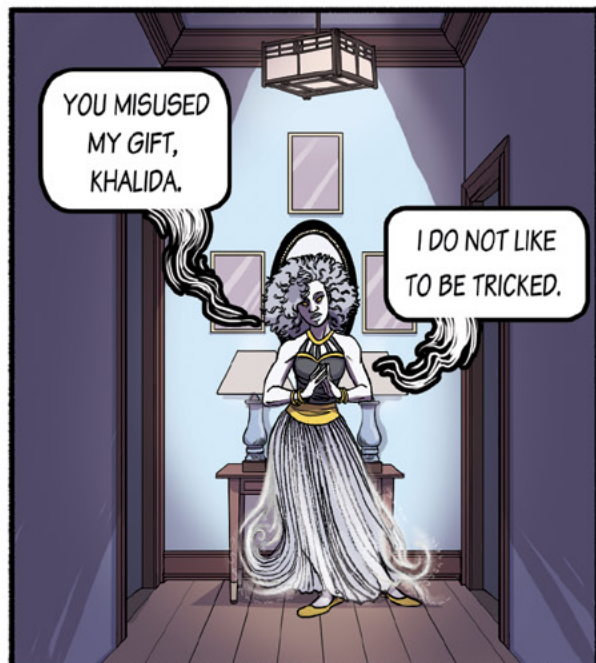
YOU JUST
PRESS THE ROOF,
AND TAD-AH!

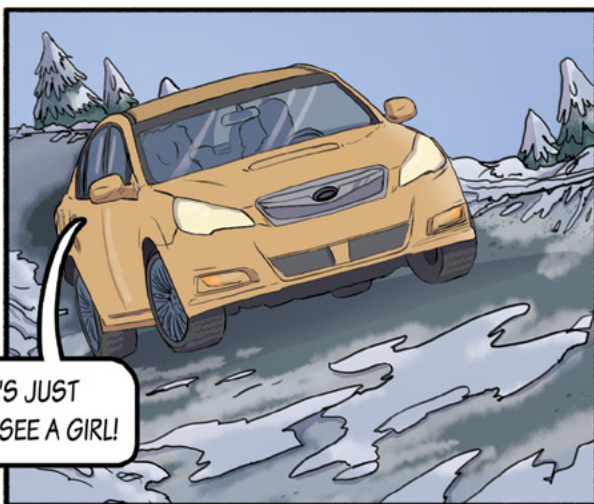
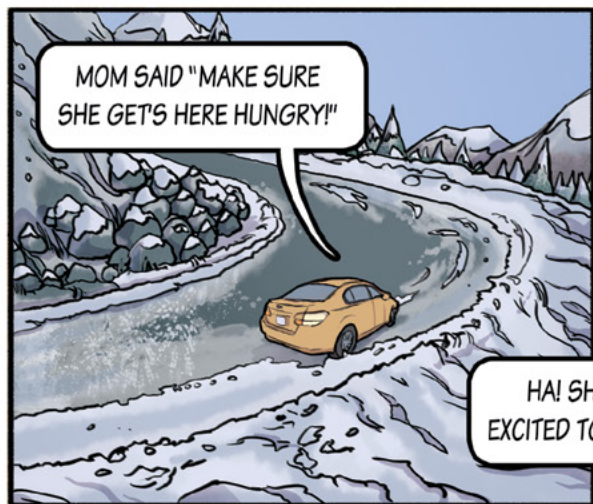
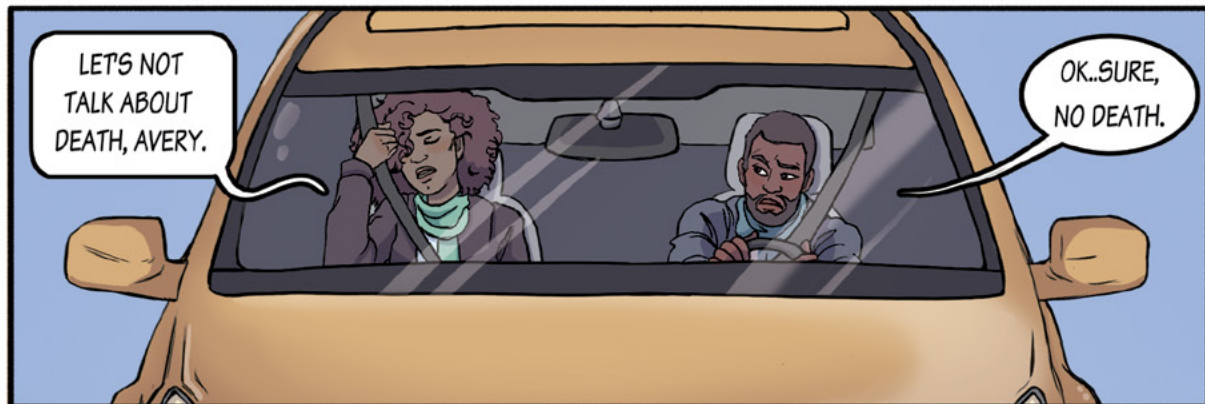
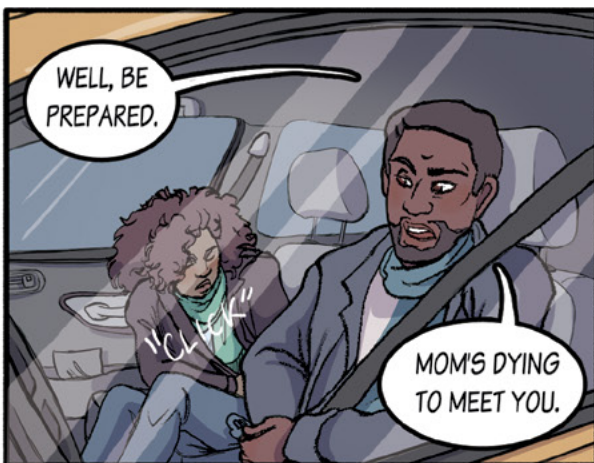
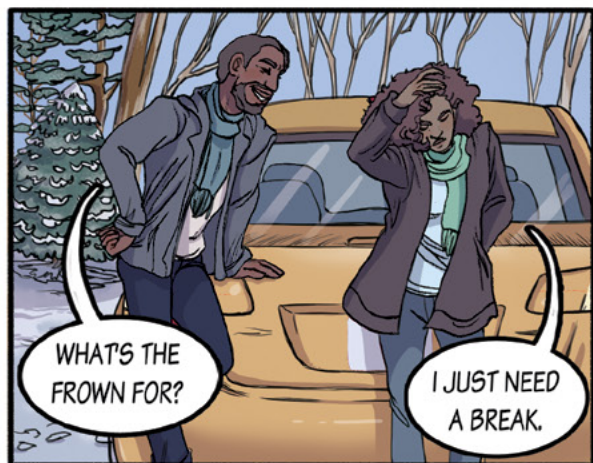
IT WEIGHED HEAVILY ON
HER, TO KNOW THAT I WAS COMING
AND COULD NOT BE STOPPED.

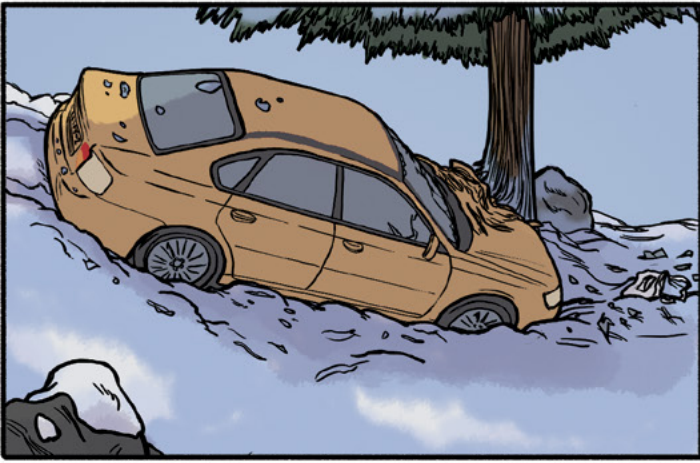


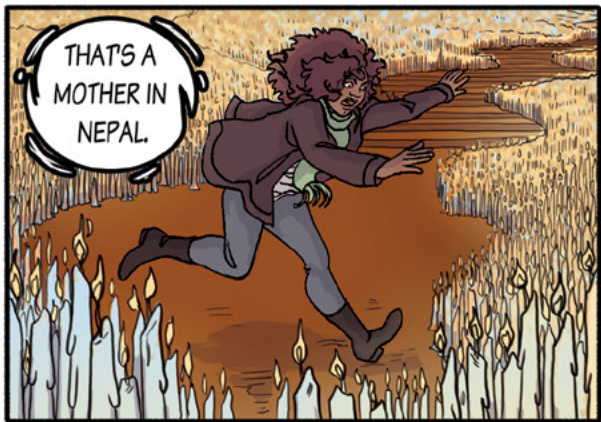
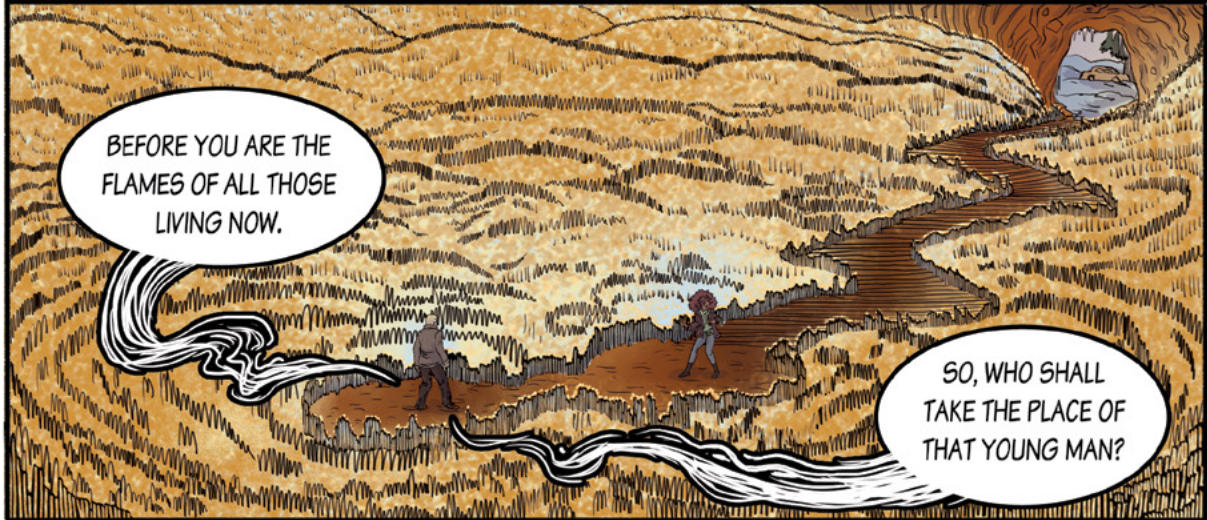


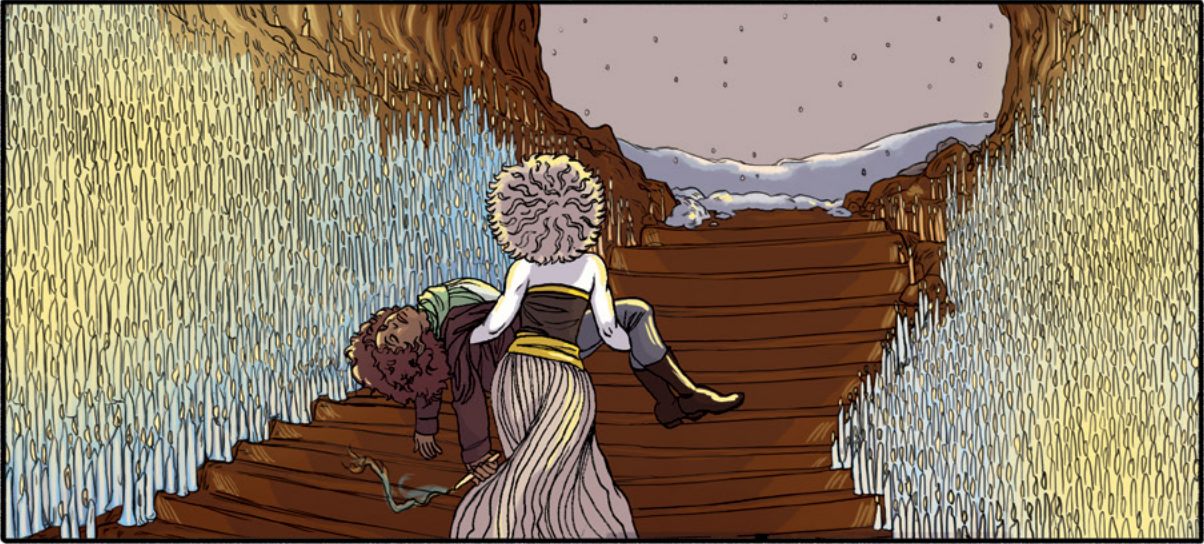















LITTLE FOOLERY
PRESENTS

CRANE WIFE

SCRIPT
ALEX SINGER


ART
JAYD AIT-KACI

TYPE
ARIANA MAHER




WHEN THE MASTER
DIED, I CAME TO THE
YAMAGATA HOUSEHOLD.

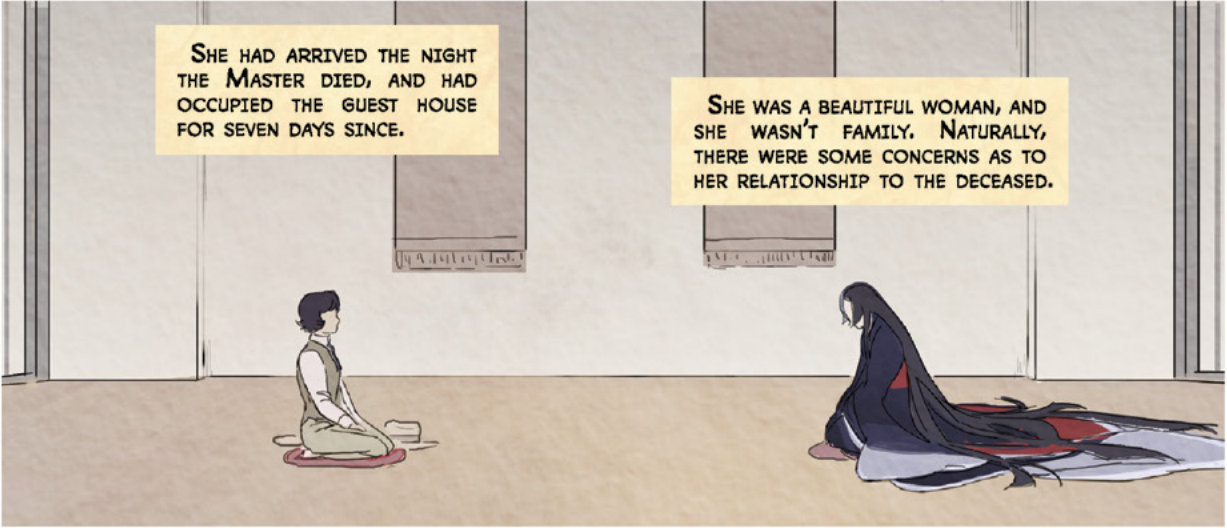
THE FAMILY WAS VERY
RICH, SO THERE WERE MANY
MOURNERS AT THE ESTATE.



THE FAMILY ASKED
ME TO INTERVIEW
ONE IN PARTICULAR:




ONE LADY
MITSURU.




SHE HAD ARRIVED THE NIGHT
THE MASTER DIED, AND HAD
OCCUPIED THE GUEST HOUSE
FOR SEVEN DAYS SINCE.

SHE WAS A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, AND
SHE WASN'T FAMILY. NATURALLY,
THERE WERE SOME CONCERNS AS TO
HER RELATIONSHIP TO THE DECEASED.




IT SEEMED SILLY TO DANCE
AROUND THE ISSUE, SO, AS WE
SAT TOGETHER, I ASKED...

We met
on a cold day
in winter.



We were
lost in the
storm.



It was a terrible
blizzard, and there
was blood, so much
blood...



We helped
one another find
our way home.

The hunter's
hands were warm. They
held me, desperate
for life.



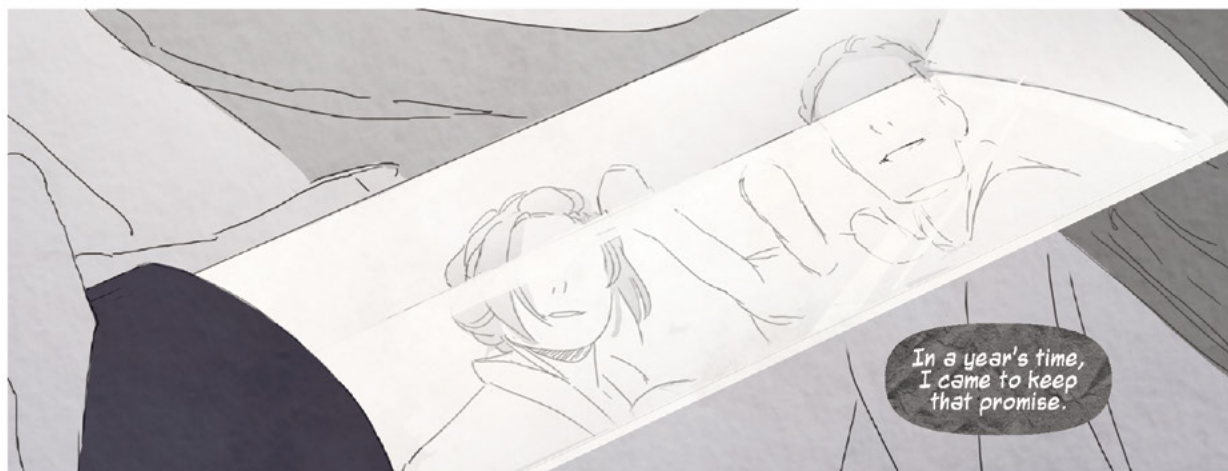
When the storm
passed, we both went
our separate ways.

We were
predator and prey,
after all.

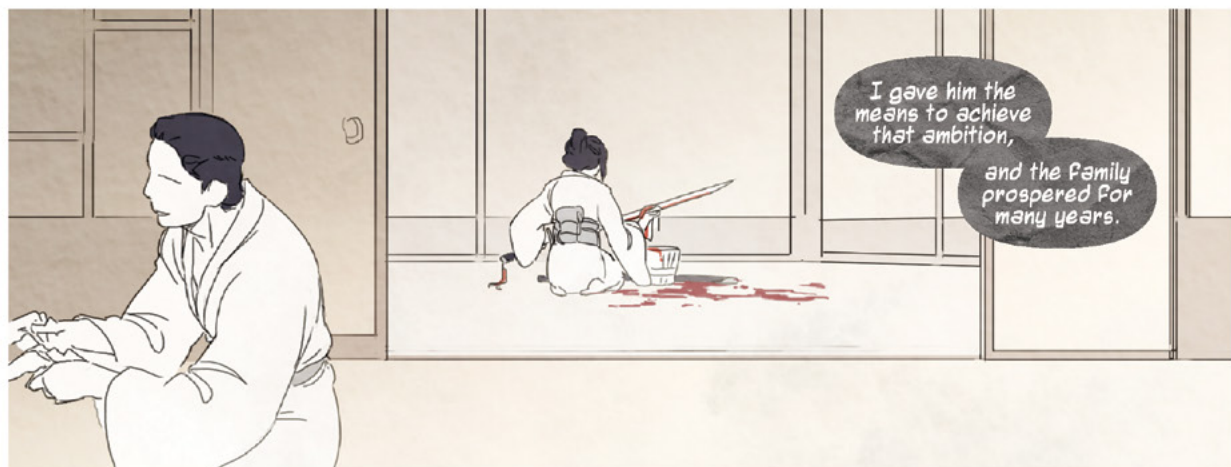


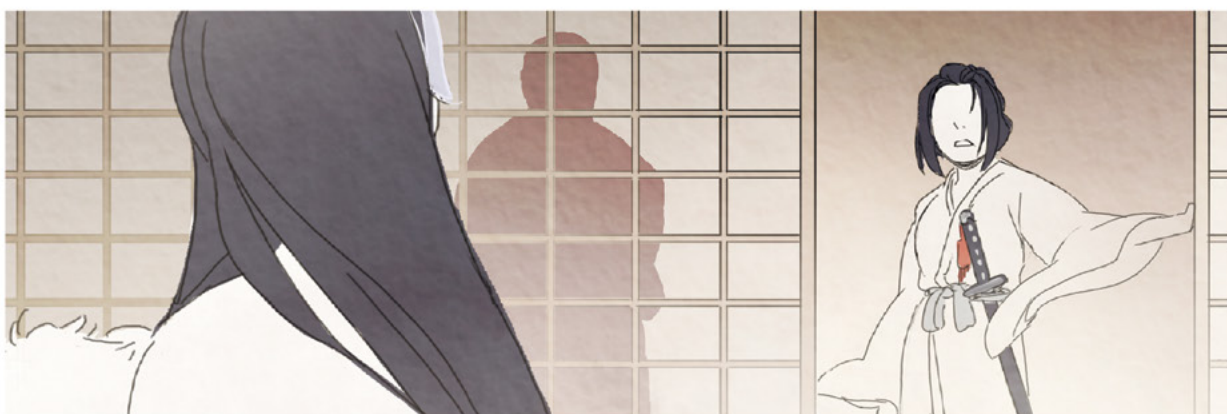
But we promised
that we would do one
another a favor.

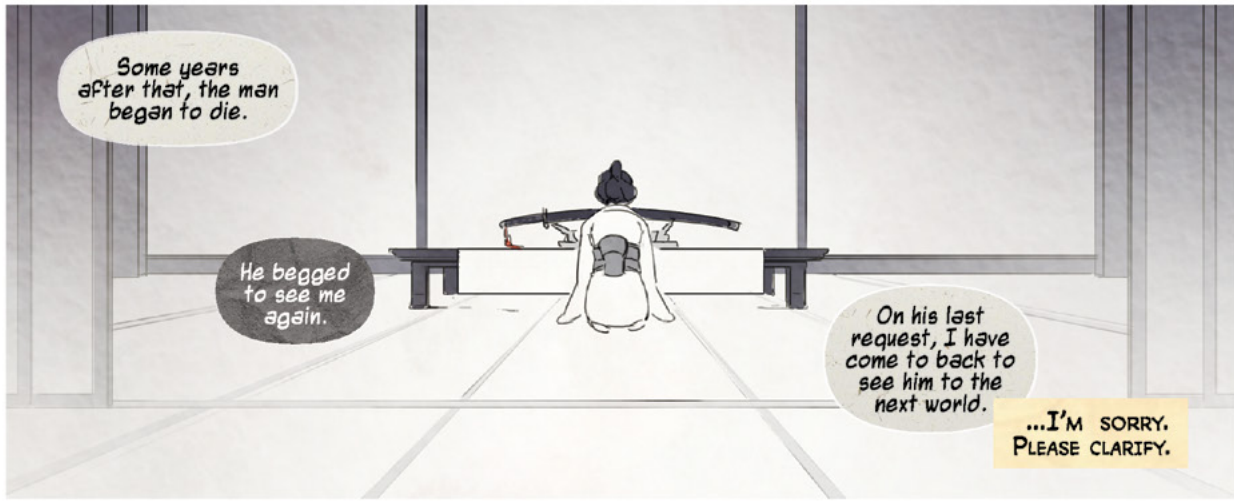
Though we were
poor then, some day
our Fortunes would
change.



In a year's time,
I came to keep
that promise.









You see,
I liked paper
cranes.



All those
perfect little
birds.

Thousands
and thousands.

Folded
neatly.



For
thirteen
years.

On
colored
paper.

After the
family sent me
away, you
see.


The day
that they stopped
coming, was the day
the man died.




Folded
perfectly.



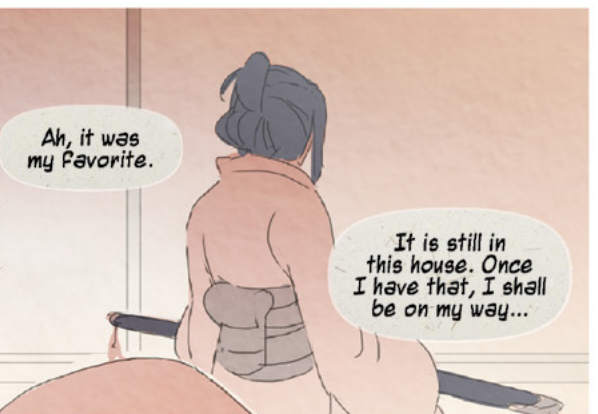
They were all
quite beautiful.



But I
want only
the first.




It was plain
and white, but...

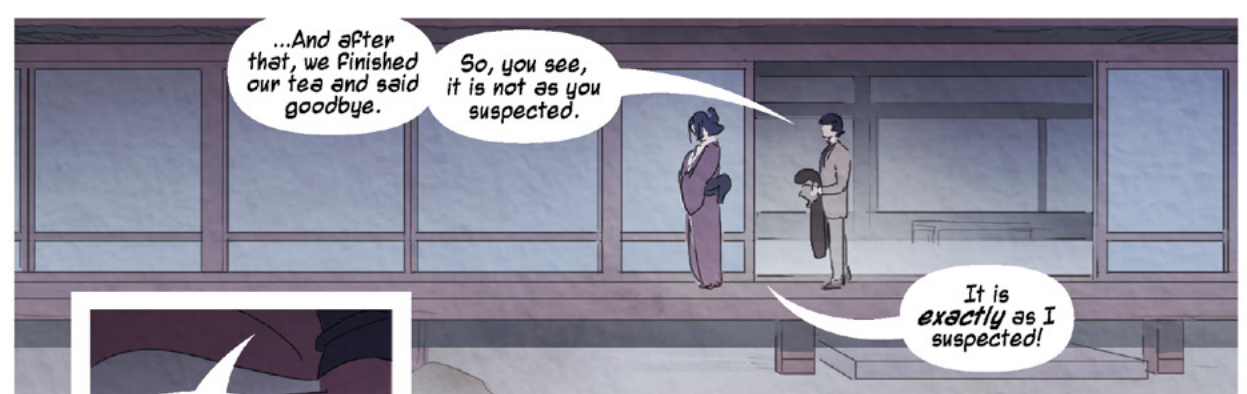


Ah, it was
my favorite.

It is still in
this house. Once
I have that, I shall
be on my way...




So that the
Yamagata family
will know that I did
not forget.




...And after
that, we finished
our tea and said
goodbye.

So, you see,
it is not as you
suspected.

It is
exactly as I
suspected!



I knew
that woman
was more than
she seemed.



I'd known
from the day
she first came
to our house.

So tell me,
what do you
think she is?

A demon?

A ghoul?



...I think she is only a bird, at one point lost in a storm.

You have nothing to fear from her, so long as you just let her leave as she wishes.

She will take what was owed and leave what was given.



'As she wishes.'

Hmph.

That's brazen.



And all that talk of friendship...

Don't suppose she told you she was my husband's mistress?

That he had me send her money while she was in the city, along with those blasted cranes?



...I didn't have to ask, Lady Yamagata.

Those sorts of stories are not so uncommon.



Ack. You *are* one of those 'modern' women aren't you?



Well, nevermind that.

She will leave us be if we let her go?

Fine!

We're happy to be done with her.



I imagine the feeling is quite mutual.



Tch.



Thank you for
your consultation,
Detective.



I will have
a man see
you out.



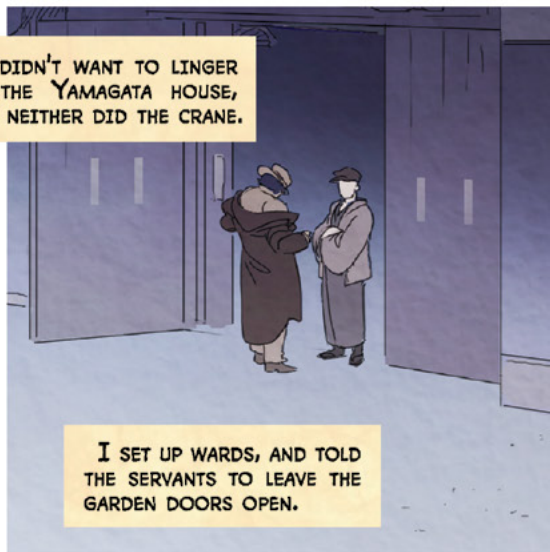
I LEFT IT AT THAT.



I DIDN'T WANT TO LINGER
IN THE YAMAGATA HOUSE,
AND NEITHER DID THE CRANE.



I SET UP WARDS, AND TOLD
THE SERVANTS TO LEAVE THE
GARDEN DOORS OPEN.



IT WAS A STANDARD CASE.
IT WAS A STANDARD STORY:

A POOR MAN CARED FOR AN
INJURED CRANE IN A SNOWSTORM,
A YEAR LATER A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN
GRANTED HIM PROSPERITY BEYOND
HIS WILDEST DREAMS.



WHEN THE WOMAN'S TRUE
NATURE WAS REVEALED, SHE
WOULD TURN BACK INTO A BIRD...

I'D HEARD SOMETHING
LIKE THAT BEFORE.



THAT, AS FAR AS I
KNEW, WAS HOW THE
STORY ENDED...



You can go.




But leave this.



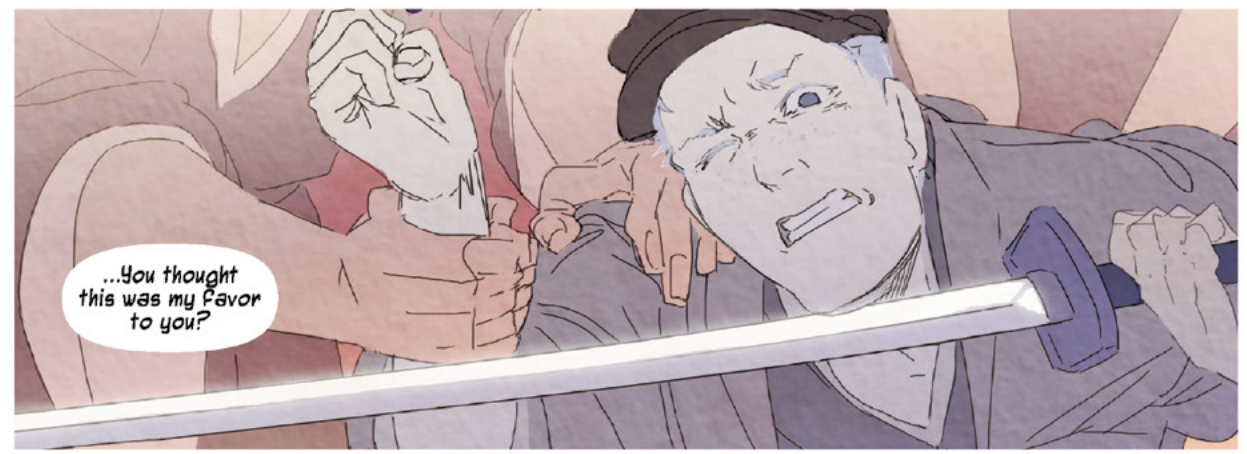
It was
a gift, wasn't
it?

It would be
rude to take
it back.






All
this time...



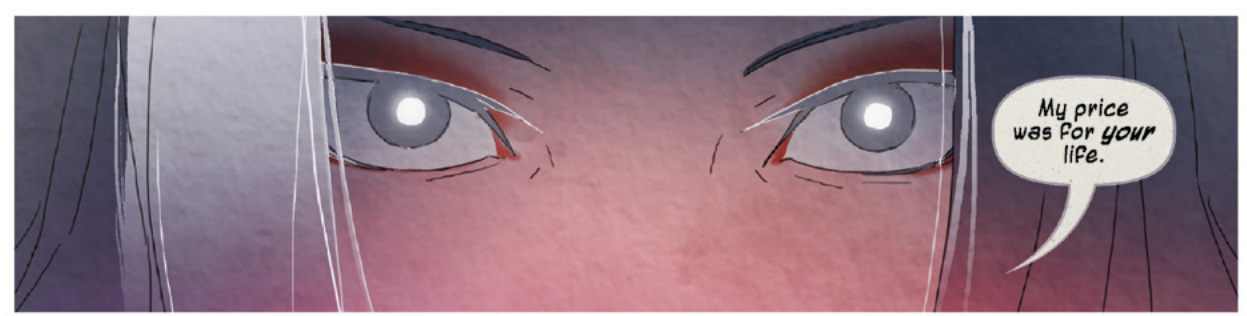
...You thought
this was my favor
to you?



Oh no,
you poor
woman.



The
sword was
a gift.



My price
was for *your*
life.





I GUESS MOST PEOPLE
WOULD HAVE ASKED,

'WHO WOULD DO ALL
THAT FOR SOME PAPER
CRANES?'

I NEVER QUESTIONED IT.
SPIRITS ARE ODD ABOUT
THESE THINGS.

BUT SOME TIME LATER
I LEARNED:

THE WIFE HAD PASSED
AWAY. AND THE HOUSE HAD
DECLARED A NEW MASTER...

YAMAGATA IZURU.



Oh...

Then the true
master...



Once upon a time,
in a deep and wild
snow storm a man met
an injured crane...



Once upon a time,
a young girl came to a
poor couple's door...



...A
COMMON
STORY.



...OR SO I'D
THOUGHT.

...So the first
of her paper cranes
was a child.



Lady Mitsuru,
what favor did you
ask in return?

...I'D HONESTLY NEVER
THOUGHT TO ASK.

END



THE STEADFAST TIN AUTOMATON

written by ALEX SINGER ::: art by JAYD AIT-KACI

They put Steinhildr in a box.

She could hardly blame them for it. It was what one did to tools that were not in use, and, besides, it was a relief from the loudness of the war.

They stored the box in a warehouse beneath an old theater. The theater stayed mostly closed for renovations, and her only visitor was an old man the owner paid to be sure no one stole any of the old costumes.

“Here now, Hilde,” said the old caretaker, who was at that time the only one who called her anything but ‘the unit’ or ‘the weapon.’ “Let me just crack the lid just a bit for you. It must be terribly stuffy, and you must want to see something.”

To which Steinhildr replied that she had seen quite enough, and anyway her air intakes had taken in much worse than this. Mustard gas, in particular, had been difficult to process.

The old man often left the lid cracked, anyway. His grandson had been a member of the fighting unit who had paid for her return after the war.

“Our Minerva!” they called her. “Our mighty warrior maiden.” They found it a shame to scrap her, even when they brought her home and discovered they were all too broke to truly keep her.

Selling her to the theater had been a gentle compromise.

Johannes, one of the young cavalry men, had often said that the pretend wars had been much prettier. Pretty like her, he said, and her glass spun hair.

“If only this war were pretend, Hilde,” he said, with a sad smile, the day before he and his horse were ripped to pieces under the fire of an enemy automaton’s mounted machine gun. She had been pretty, too, that cruel French automaton, but nothing about her had been pretend.

When the renovations were close to done, the old man stopped coming. He may have died, though it was also possible that the theater had found no other use for him. Before he left, he damaged the latch on Steinhildr’s box, so that it could never fully close.

“Get some air, Hilde,” he told her with a wink. “You are a fine lady. You should treat yourself well.”

It was the last thing he ever said to her. Steinhildr supposed he might have been fired for breaking the box, but no one ever came to fix it.

There were far more important things to concentrate on, after all. Things had suddenly gotten much busier. The other automatons rattled with excitement, for they said with its renovations finished, the theater had found a new owner.

“Someone who really wants to use us,” said one of the old dancers.

“For something besides puppet shows, you think?” said another, wearing an old fashioned peasant’s dress.

“Oh, more than that,” sang Badin, an old gramophone. Badin had been

designed to play music at spring fairs. He was little more than a mechanical head and torso, set on a stand that could be wheeled to wherever music was required. His face was molded to look like a festive clown. He knew more music than words, and so he tended to replace the lyrics of his favorite songs with dialogue. “The new owner wishes to make money, my darling. He wishes to make us a real theater, my darling, my darling.”

The old man never came back, but many other people did. Many people, young and old, came to fetch things from the storehouse. Some of the stagehands were no older than Steinhildr’s old unit in the war. Once or twice one of these younger stagehands would examine the box where Steinhildr was kept. When they cracked open the lid, Steinhildr would turn her glass eyes upwards.

“Good evening,” she would say. “I am Steinhildr M94. What do you require of me?”

The stagehand would quickly replace the lid.

This was not to say all the automatons received such a response to their greetings: The automatons made for dancing were oiled and given new clothes. Badin was given a new paint job and a speaker which allowed his voice to carry across the whole theater should he wish it.

The automatons gossiped amongst themselves: Where had all this money come from? And from whom had all these new machines come?

“Fools, fools!” sang Badin in the beat of a children’s song. “Have you not heard? One of our new patrons is the old man Hoffman. Why else do you think they’ve dusted us all off?”

This caused a stir among all the automatons, even Steinhildr. Hoffman was known to be one of the greatest mechanists still living, and he had been considered invaluable during the war. No one had heard from him in a long time, and everyone wondered what he was doing pouring money into a small theater in Rosenstern.

“Not just money!” crowed Badin. “They say he has opened a new workshop. They say he wishes to return to the business!”

That seemed quite impossible, Steinhildr thought. It had been said the Master had withdrawn from building automatons after the Great War, and yet new mechanisms began to arrive, ones intended to make the stage move.

“Well, the new sets are nice, I suppose,” they often said, “but who is performing?”

That question was answered on the last working day of the week. Instead of equipment and instructions, the Master sent a new automaton.

It had been quite the scene, apparently. He’d marched right into the office of the owner. He’d brought a woman wrapped in furs. She’d held his hand in a manner most observers had called fearful. No one could tell, from first glance, that she’d been a machine.

“Oh, yes,” cried Badin, who had heard the fearful murmurings of the chorus automatons. “So sad, so sad. Soon we shall all be obsolete, obsolete like the spear lady who stays in her box!”

News of Hoffman’s ‘new doll’ filtered down into the storage room, from stage hands and from irate older units. It was remarkable, they said. The Master had not lost his touch.

“Where are you going, war machine?” the other theater-owned automatons had once asked her when, once a week at midnight, Steinhildr would slide the lid off her box and push her way out.

They held rehearsals that evening, even though all of the workers had gone home. Steinhildr heard the ‘tap, tap, tap’ on the ceiling above, as she had heard it for the past three nights since the new automaton arrived.

It was this tapping that Steinhildr followed up the steps from the storeroom. She maneuvered carefully — her right leg had suffered damage from a machine gun, and moved just a half a second more slowly than the left. She followed the sound and the light from the small lantern lit on the stage. Sheets had been thrown over most of the new on stage mechanisms, except Badin, who played an old wordless instrumental.

In the space where the crew passed between performances, she first saw her.

The new automaton did not wear white. Her skin, or the surface that had been crafted to look like skin, was pale enough to suffice. She wore a dress of plain grey, one that lay tight around her waist and flowed around her legs. It showed how she moved.

Oh, how she moved! The automaton stood only on one leg, with the second extended behind her. She wore no stocking, so as to show off the silver and black joints under each knee. She tipped in a motion not unlike a water pump. When the toe of her raised leg, sharp and tipped in silver, swept down across floor, swinging the new automaton across the room in a swell of Badin’s song, Steinhildr regretted the comparison. The automaton’s waist twisted with as much grace as any war machine.

Her sharp toes plucked the floor boards. Her arms stretched at either side of her like a bird. Steinhildr leaned forward to catch her better in her sights.

This was her mistake. Her bad knee bumped a beam propped against the wall. She caught it before it fell, but the end scraped the floorboards, and that was enough.

The new automaton’s heels sank back to the floor. Her body swiveled in one clean motion. Steinhildr saw her face. It was round, well-carved, and full of a shock.

“Who’s there?” called the dancer, in a sweet voice. It carried only the slightest of mechanical accents.

Steinhildr gave no answer. She retreated, with the utmost haste, back to her



storage room and her box. She spent the rest of that night there in silence, as she had so many years before.

“War machine, war machine, where have you been?” Badin had no illusions of who had been snooping about backstage that night.

Steinhildr ignored his song. “What model was she? I did not see a number on her.”

Badin found these questions ridiculous, and hummed as much. “Hah! No model number. She is one of a kind, our fine Coppelia,” he sang. “One of a kind, not like you and all your sisters, Miss 94.”

Steinhildr was not interested in her own designations. “How does she move?”

“Much more fleetly than you, honorable war machine,” answered Badin. “But how odd of you to ask such things! Who knew, two-three, that you, two-three, could think of things besides your past glories?”

He set that last question to an old victory march.

Steinhildr let out a deep breath from her chambers. “No,” she said, because Badin was incorrect. There were no glories to consider. “What do you think she is?”

“She is Coppelia,” sang Badin, in children’s nursery rhyme.

Coppelia. Coppelia. He said other things, after that, but the name was all Steinhildr heard.

The performance was a rousing success. Steinhildr did not see it, but others spoke of it quite a bit.

“They were beside themselves with shock and awe,” said the chorus automaton, sourly. “Of course they were. It was new and incomprehensible. People love things that are new and incomprehensible. The theater is saved. This is the worst.”

“The worst?” sang Badin. “But I should think you would be happy.”

“It means I will have to keep being her set piece,” huffed the automaton. “I should nearly rather climb into the box that frightful war machine sleeps in.”

“They are mocking me,” thought Steinhildr, but she found she could not think much of it. The performance had been a success. That meant there would be another.

They moved Steinhildr’s box backstage. They gave her new water, oiled her joints, and measured her for a new costume. They combed her hair. They gave her a fake spear. It was amongst this fuss that Steinhildr heard from the other automatons again, as they milled about waiting for their own assignments.

“All this fuss for that piece of tubing,” muttered a member of the chorus. “What good is it being ‘almost human?’ No offense, Leopold.”

“Quite all right,” said one of the dressers, who was quite friendly with the automatons. “I quite agree, you know. It leaves us uneasy too, you know, seeing her shift about like that. That is Hoffman’s thing, I suppose.”

“I suppose Hoffman must somehow occupy himself, since there will be no more wars for him. Still, I wish he could entertain himself elsewhere. Why here? Do you know?”

“They say that Rosenstern was a boyhood home of his,” said Leopold, “but I’ve heard that some important people are visiting the old estate in the north.”

The chorus loved a bit of fleshy intrigue.

“Important people? Do you mean political people?” one asked.

“Does Hoffman think he will impress them again?” asked another. “Everyone remembers those horrors he created during the war! Oh, ah, no offense to any possible present company!”

They had forgotten about Steinhildr and her box.

“Present company forgives you,” said a new voice, one clear, wry, and almost human. “But present company should think you are being awful rude.”

Steinhildr nearly shifted with surprise. She recognized the feet that walked into the room then. She could hear the members of the chorus stumble, and Leopold dropped his measuring stick.

“Coppelia!” said Leopold. “Your fitting was scheduled for this afternoon—”

“I know,” said Coppelia, quite ignoring the fumbling of the automatons around her. “I’m sorry to be a bother about this, but Father wants to be sure the weight of my costume will not offset my routine.”

“Ah, that will be tricky,” stumbled Leopold. “It hasn’t been brought up yet—”

“Could it be brought up now?” asked Coppelia. “I would hate to disappoint Father. He is very set in these things.”

The threat of Hoffman’s displeasure was enough to cause Leopold to rush off to the basement. The automatons shuffled off to the stage. It left Coppelia alone.

She knelt beside Steinhildr’s box.

“You might have said something,” said Coppelia. “It is cruel of them to speak of you with so little respect. You have seen far more than them.”

Steinhildr said nothing. She saw fingers curl in the crack of the lid.

“I wish you would speak to me, at least,” said Coppelia. “I have decided I’d like to be the sort of performer who speaks to my fans. You watch my rehearsals, don’t you? You are very loyal, if you’re willing to sit through all that.”

Still, Steinhildr said nothing.

“You move to the beat of a march,” noted Coppelia. “I could hear it in your steps. That is how I knew it must be someone who once went to war. Badin says this next performance will be all about war. At least tell me your name?”

‘Steinhildr M94’ is what the answer ought to have been, but Steinhildr could make out the faint sliver of Coppelia’s wide, worried eyes.

“Hilde,” she said.

“Hilde,” said Coppelia. She sounded it out with such life in her words that the war machine knew she could never be called ‘Steinhildr’ again. “Ah, what a gentle name. How lovely, Hilde. I am Coppelia. It is a great pleasure to meet you, my first fan. Please, do come again tonight if you are able. I should like to see you, and not your box.”

“But, oh, my dear, you have a gentleman caller!” sang Badin, with clear dislike.

“Hush Badin,” said Coppelia. “I invited her.”

“A spy!” sang Badin. “A phantom, lurking in the wings...”

“Badin, you must be tired,” said Coppelia, and pulled the cloth over his head.

Hilde waited until his gears had wound into their sleeping positions before she spoke. “What he has said is perfectly correct.”

Coppelia pivoted towards the sound of her voice.

“Please, do forgive him,” said Coppelia. “I know most think he is a bother, but he makes music for me.”

“He thinks you are beautiful,” said Hilde, quietly. “He shall sing you whatever song you would like.”

Coppelia smiled and shook her head.

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Coppelia. Her eyes dimmed, faintly. “When Father is here, he sings what he likes. Oh, please come into the light. I’d love to see you.”

“You cannot see me as I am?” asked Hilde, in some confusion.

“I was not built to see in the dark!” laughed Coppelia, brightening. “But, you obviously were. How lucky you are.”

Carefully, Hilde pushed forward into the circle of light afforded by Coppelia’s lamp. She moved slowly, mindful of the drag on her damaged leg.

Coppelia’s eyes lit a touch brighter. “Oh, look at you!” She ran to her, her hands fluttering in the air just above Hilde’s elbows. “I have never seen one of my father’s war models. Not that I think you are old— But, oh! Your arms—”

Hilde felt the senses in her eyes turn in rapid focus at the sudden flurry around her. “I am older,” she said.

“No, but I am being rude,” said Coppelia, knotting her hands in front of her. Her hands were much better articulated, filled with a dozen little, silver joints.

“You have my permission,” said Hilde.

Coppelia tilted gratefully. She ran her hands up Hilde’s arms with all the care and curiosity of an engineer. “Is it true that you have interchangeable parts?”

“Yes,” said Hilde.

“And you can lift twice your weight?”

“Four times my weight,” said Hilde. “Yes.”

"You would be able to lift me, then. I am not reinforced like you," said Coppelia. "Can this armor come off?"

"Yes," said Hilde.

Coppelia paused. "...That was a very unfortunate question, wasn't it."

"No," said Hilde.

"You are teasing me." There was a faint hint of a laugh in Coppelia's vocalizer. "Dance with me."

All of Hilde's process wound to a momentary halt as she processed that request. "Dance?"

"Yes," said Coppelia.

"I cannot," said Hilde.

"You can march, can't you?"

"That is very different."

"Not so much," said Coppelia. "I should like to know how to dance with a soldier, and you, you are more a soldier than any other I have ever met."

"You should not wish for such things," said Hilde.

"I will show you," said Coppelia. She held out a hand.

Coppelia pulled the cloth off of Badin. She asked him to play a song.

"That siege engine is meant for things more lethal than this," he hummed.

"Don't be so silly, Badin," said Coppelia.

So she danced with Hilde. She guided one hand to her jointed waist and extended the other outwards. Her fingers held the perfect pressure. They shifted along Hilde's arm, her still hand, with a subtlety and nervous energy she would not expect of an automaton. Yet when she pulled near, Hilde could hear her central pumps. They worked with a steady beat that was not all that much different than a human heart. Not at all.

"Please come again," said Coppelia. "Father will be seeing me tomorrow, but the night after, I want to see you."

"I should not distract you," said Hilde.

"It is not a distraction," said Coppelia. "You don't have to answer just now, but do come."

Hilde went back to her box, but she found she could not lie so still.

"Do come," Coppelia had said. Do come. Please come again.

She played the sound in her head, again, and again.

They said the performance was sold out. Hilde supposed it must have been. She had detected at least three hundred and forty-six individual heartbeats in filing into the seats, which meant that the theater had been filled to capacity.

"And where is our star?" muttered the chorus automatons, with great distaste. They all waited in the wings. "In her dressing room? Who does she think she is,

an actress? Leopold, are you sure this is on right?”

“I have refastened it three times,” said Leopold. He had finished with Hilde’s play armor a few minutes ago. “You should be glad. They say the men from the north estate have come tonight. They say they’re in the front row, and Hoffman—”

From his spot behind the stage, Badin’s humming ceased.

“Good evening,” said Hilde. “Master Hoffman.”

“Good evening,” said the man, who had been waiting in the door.

“Good evening,” said Leopold, in some alarm. “I am sorry, Master Hoffman, you must wish to see the director—”

“I have no interest in you,” said Hoffman, in a high voice that scratched like a record. He wore a narrow grey suit and clutched a wicked black cane.

Leopold backed out the door. Hoffman snapped his cane against the wooden floor and paced along the row of waiting automatons, who stood as straight and as proper as they could under his attentions.

He stopped in front of Hilde.

“M94,” he said. “Steinhildr. Correct?”

“That is what I was called,” said Hilde.

“Odd response,” said Hoffman, pacing around her. He plucked at her costume and frowned. “What have they put you in — nevermind that. You are not in bad condition. Your higher processes are obviously working. Heavens, but you are old. And so heavy! What was I thinking, giving you all of that armor?”

Hilde’s response was carefully automated. “My armor is designed to repel heavy artillery fire—”

Hoffman held up a hand. “I was not looking for an answer,” he said. “I have not seen an M94 unit in some years. It is funny that I should find you here. Do you know why it is so funny?”

“Shall I answer that, Master Hoffman?” asked Hilde. Automatons began to file out. Badin began to sing. Hoffman raised his eyebrows.

“I will tell you,” he said, with a sigh. “I got my start building your type for puppet shows. That sort that played the streets when I was a boy. Your prototype hit fake dragons over the head and the children laughed at her. She was so good at striking fake dragons that I built her up to fight real ones. Then they put their dragons to bed and threw her away. There should have been no place for you in this world, but here you are, doing puppet shows again. It must be very boring for you.”

“It is adequate, Master Hoffman.”

The Master’s eyes turned hard. “Don’t simper. She mentioned you.”

There was an edge in his voice. Hilde felt her targeting scopes activate.

He noticed, of course. He put his hand on her arm and laughed. “No, no, don’t bother getting alarmed,” he said. “I do not mind. In fact, I mind your

meddling so little I will buy you off of this silly place when our run is over. Aren't you fortunate? You should thank me, Steinhildr. You are about to have purpose again."

The response came whether Hilde had meant it or not. "Thank you, Master Hoffman."

The stage began to creak and move. The lights changed, casting the top of Hoffman's face in shadow as his lips pulled into a line. It was not quite a smile. He patted Hilde on her arm and left.

The music played. The curtains rose. Steinhildr marched. Coppelia danced.

In the front row, sat a row of the important men from the northern estates. They had shiny boots and long coats. They watched the proceedings with great interest, murmuring amongst themselves.

Between acts the audience roared with applause, but Steinhildr had been made to hear many things through the din of war. She could hear what the men said, as their eyes gleamed and their boots creaked on the old, wooden floors.

"That dancing one is perfect," said the first.

"She is of great interest to us," said the second. "Of course, with some modifications..."

"Tell me what customizations you would like me to make," said Hoffman, in the flicking shadow of his automaton's dance.

That night, as the cast and crew celebrated, Badin sang a new song. "How fortunate! How fortunate we are!" he crowed, between verses. "For all that we have lost will be found again soon! How fortunate for Coppelia, how fortunate for our country!"

He sang to the beat of a march. He was still attached to the sound machine. His voice echoed from every corner of the theater, as loud as any drum.

When Hilde found Coppelia that evening, there was no music playing at all. She sat in the center of the stage, with her legs folded close to her chassis. The old oil lamp flickered faintly. Hilde hung back, just out of the light.

"Please, come," said Coppelia, her vocalizers at their lowest setting.

"Do you wish to dance?" asked Hilde, sliding forward.

Coppelia tilted her head, as though considering. Then, she slid her hand into Hilde's, she levered herself off the floor.

"Before I came here," said Coppelia, as they moved. "I lived with my father in a university. I do not remember so much from that time, but I do remember that there was a student. A young man. He worked for my father, sometimes, and I think he thought that I was human."

"Did it bother you?" asked Hilde.

"I didn't know what being bothered was!" Coppelia laughed, in spite of

herself. Her shoulders moved with it. Hilde wondered how she had learned to do that. “But he bothered my father. ‘You do not have time for such things,’ Father would say to me. Then one day the student... stopped.”

“He stopped coming?”

“He stopped,” said Coppelia. “Tell me about the Great War.”

Soft music began to play. The opening chords of a waltz. Hilde blinked, unused to the sudden change in topic. “There is not much worth saying.”

“Can you lie?” asked Coppelia, with interest.

“No,” admitted Hilde. “There is really not much to say. I knew a student, too. I knew many students. They were very young. They called me their Minerva. Their battle maiden. Most of them died.”

“How did they die?” asked Coppelia.

“The trenches were wet,” said Hilde. “I was proofed against moisture. They were not. Their vent systems would get clogged from wetness, and sometimes also gas. They would lie down in the mud and stop moving. Some died in the advance. They would catch on barbed wire. It would hold them and tear them, while the enemy automatons shot at them. If my guns jammed, they would be torn to pieces before I could return fire.”

“That can’t be right,” said Coppelia. “No one dies like that on a battlefield.”

“Not in the battles you have known,” said Hilde. Her eyes refocused.

Coppelia went quiet. Her feet slowed. Her hand tightened on Hilde’s shoulder.

“Those men,” she said, finally. “They want to make me into a war automaton. They said that I will be a beautiful valkyrie, and that my country will love me. Do you think I would be as good at war?”

Hilde stepped away from Coppelia. She observed her smooth joints, and the careful tilt of her head.

“You would be as good at war as you are at dancing,” said Hilde.

“Ah,” said Coppelia, pivoting with expert care. She led Hilde through four more steps. “Hilde. You are not so bad at dancing.”

“That is kind of you to say.”

“Did no one ever tell you that?” asked Coppelia.

“Never, before I met you.”

“Hilde,” said Coppelia. “I do not want to go to war.”

Hilde stopped. Coppelia bumped into her. Her metal knee clicked against Hilde’s softly. Hilde steadied her, both hands resting on the other automaton’s narrow, pale shoulders.

She pushed a strand of Coppelia’s glass-spun hair away from her face. “You would be surprised,” said Hilde, “how seldom men will check inside a box.”

The music grew louder. Hilde froze. She had not noticed it until just then. As they stood still, the waltz grew faster, the crackling music combined into a voice, and through the theater a shrill voice began to shout, in time: “No! No! No!”

“Badin,” said Coppelia.

“My sweet Coppelia!” cried the gramophone. His voice echoed from all corners. Hilde turned her head rapidly to find him, but it was no use. His voice came from every corner of the stage. “You would not leave me, would you?”

“Badin!” said Coppelia. “Please, be quiet!”

“My sweet Coppelia!” cried Badin, as the fixtures began to rock. The old oil lamp jittered. Up above pieces of the set tore loose. “Don’t you want to be a hero?”

“Badin, be silent!” said Coppelia.

“You would let yourself be stolen?”

“Badin!”

“Thief!” cried Badin. The sound grew louder. The stage shook and groaned. Hilde saw him, sitting amongst the wooden trees. His face looked bigger than it had before, and though his smile stayed the same as it always had, his eyes glared down at them in hate. His voice had lost all music in it: it was nothing but the shrill, sharp shout like men on the radio. “Idiots! Fools! Traitors!”

Hilde threw the oil lamp at those burning eyes.

They say that the theater was too stubborn to burn, although it took several hours to bring the fires under control. They say that, in the end, the damage was not so severe.

Less fortunate were the owners of the theater, who had lost their new stage equipment in the blaze. They blamed a forgotten lamp and poor security. That their new patrons refused to pay to replace the items burned. They closed the theater for repairs. It was closed for a very long time.

‘And what a pity that was!’ said the townsfolk. There had been much talk of the theater’s new show the night it had burned down. Of course, the average townsfolk soon forgot about the stories and the rumors related to the theater and its new mechanical star.

They forgot about the men who had visited the north estate, as well. They had more pressing day to day concerns, but every now and again it would come up as a choice piece of gossip: Do you remember what they planned to do with that old theater? Do you remember that toy dancer, Coppelia?

It was said of course that Coppelia was lost in the fire. Hoffman moved on nearly as quickly as he had come.

What a pity, the people would say as they passed the closed theater. They should just get that pair from New York. Oh, haven’t you heard? A pair of automatons who do their own dancing. It is said they are the ‘big thing’ in America. They just did a show in New York. Oh, no, I don’t know the name of it. It’s a pity they waste themselves someplace like that. Imagine if they were to come here, where they might be appreciated.

Imagine what a show it might be. Imagine the things that they could do.

the flower in the Gravel

BY ANGELICA MARIA LOPEZ



IN A FAR AWAY LAND,
THERE WAS A TALE OF A DREADFUL
DRAGON THAT ROAMED THE LAND.

A DRAGON RUMORED TO
HAVE GREAT TREASURE
HIDDEN AWAY FROM ALL.

IN AN OLD ABANDONED
TOWER ON THE EDGE
OF THE GRASSLANDS.

MANY HAVE TRIED TO
CONQUER THE TOWER.

BUT ALL HAVE RETURNED
EMPTY-HANDED.

'NO TREASURE IS WORTH BRAVING THE DRAGON'S TRAPS!'
QUOTED A FAIR KNIGHT FROM THE TOWN OF DAWNSPEAK.

IT SEEMS LIKE THE DRAGON'S WIT OUTMATCHED OUR OWN,
AND THUS THE TOWER HAS FALLEN OUT OF POPULARITY
WITH ADVENTURERS WHO SEEK QUICK FAME AND FORTUNE.







LOOK, I'M NOT
HERE TO ARGUE
BUT HAVE YOU
SEEN THOSE
TRAPS?!

I NEARLY
DIED GETTING
HERE!



JUST HOW DID
YOU GET PAST
THOSE?

I'LLINO.
DUMB
LUCK?



I MAINTAIN THOSE
TRAPS. ISN'T IT OBVIOUS?
THEY'RE A WORK OF ART!



EACH ONE
IS DELICATELY
PUT TOGETHER
AND CLEANED.
DUNGEONS CAN
GET QUITE
DIRTY WITHOUT
LOVE.



BUT THAT CAN BE
SAID FOR ANY DWELLING.
SEE, THOUGH?
THERE'S NO TREA-



WAIT,
HOLD ON.

IF THERE'S
NO TREASURE,
WHY
DO YOU
LIVE HERE?

NEWS REPORTS INSIST THERE'S A DRAGON HERE. TREASURE ASIDE, YOU STILL SEEM TO BE PROTECTING *SOMETHING*.

BUT WHY?

LOOK, I MAY NOT KNOW YOU, BUT YOU'VE BEEN HERE FOR A LONG TIME, RIGHT?

DOESN'T IT GET LONELY?

I HAVEN'T SEEN SIGNS OF A DRAGON IN A WHILE, EITHER.

IT'S RUMORED THAT...

I KNOW.

IT COULDN'T HAVE LASTED FOREVER...

YOU'D THINK A DRAGON WOULD HAVE MADE THEIR APPEARANCE BY NOW, IS THAT IT?

THERE MOST DEFINITELY WAS ONE HERE. FOR A LONG TIME SHE GRACED THESE SKIES. BUT.

THAT STOPPED...

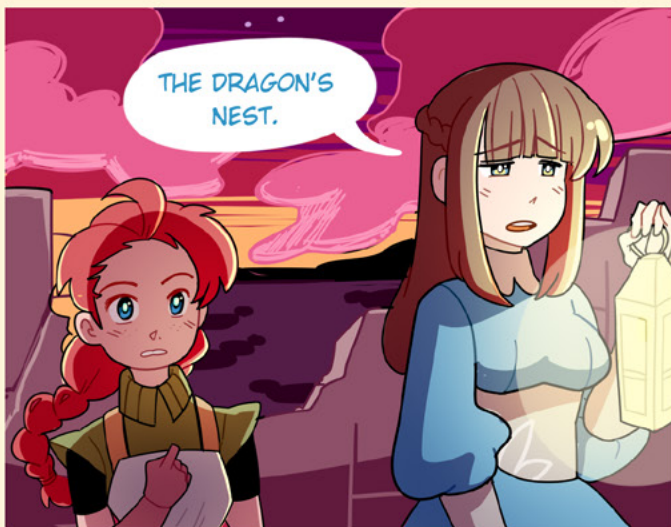
WHEN SHE FOUND ME.

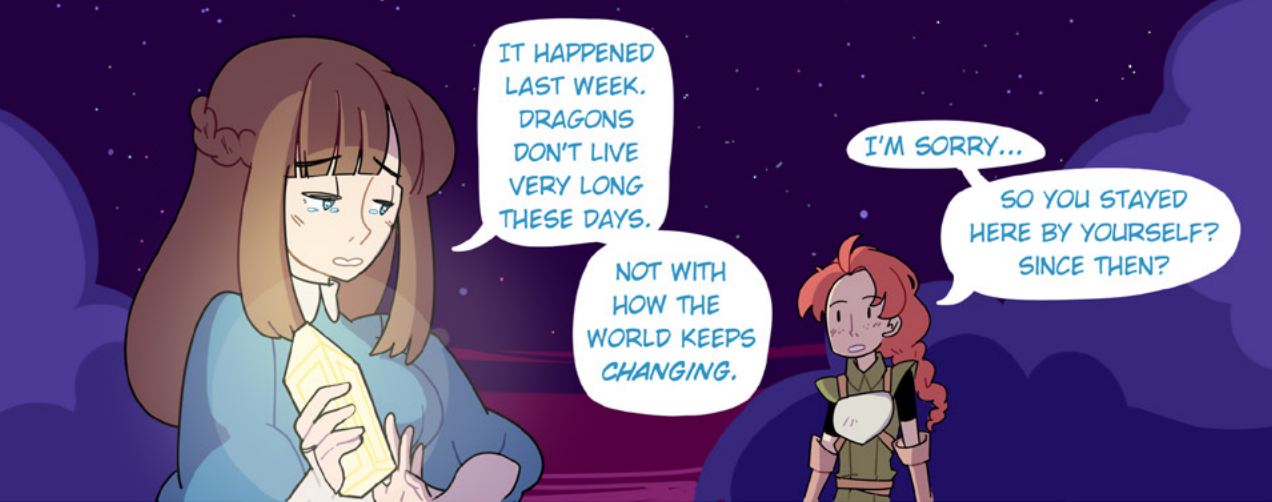
WHEN I...

WAS RESCUED.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS THE END OF MY FAIRY TALE.

BUT LET ME SHOW YOU INSTEAD-





IT HAPPENED
LAST WEEK.
DRAGONS
DON'T LIVE
VERY LONG
THESE DAYS.

NOT WITH
HOW THE
WORLD KEEPS
CHANGING.

I'M SORRY...

SO YOU STAYED
HERE BY YOURSELF?
SINCE THEN?



YES.
I COULDN'T
JUST LEAVE
HER.

THE HUMAN
WORLD HAS
NOTHING FOR
ME.



THAT'S SO SAD...

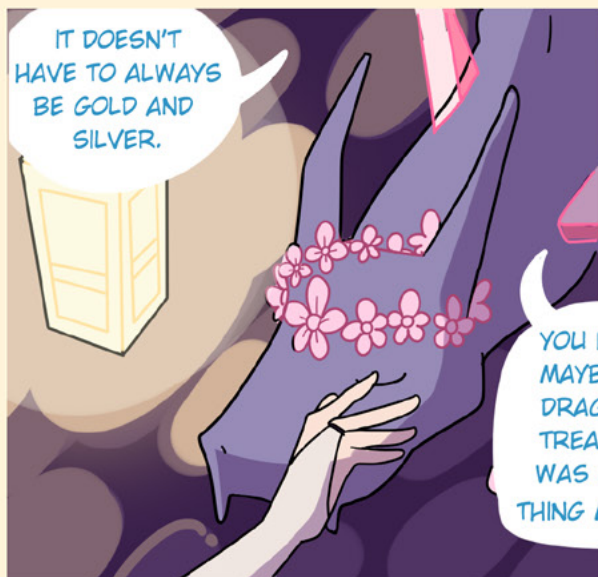
BUT-
I WONDER WHY
THE RUMORS
STARTED UP
AGAIN THOUGH
...?



Y-YOU KNOW-

WHAT IF-

M-MAYBE THE
DRAGON WAS
PROTECTING
A TREASURE
AFTER ALL?

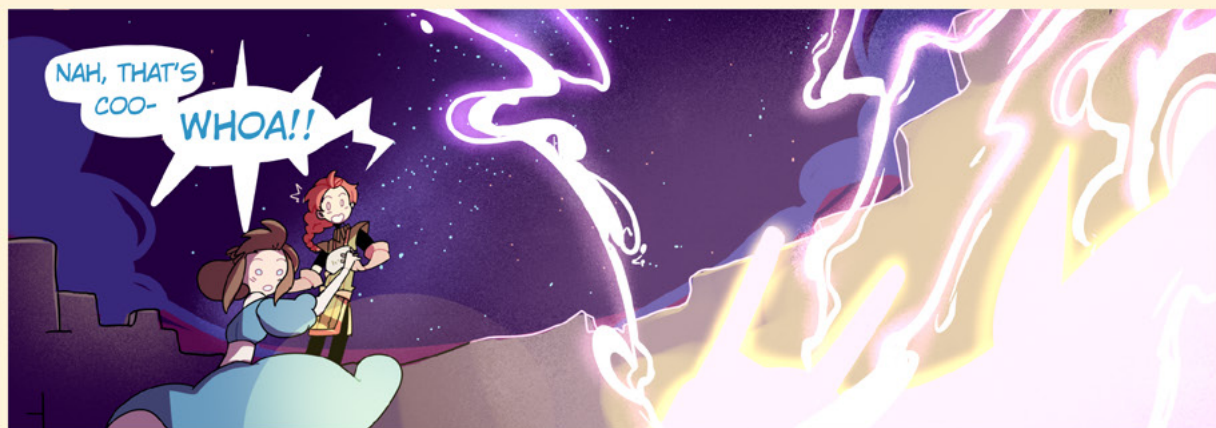
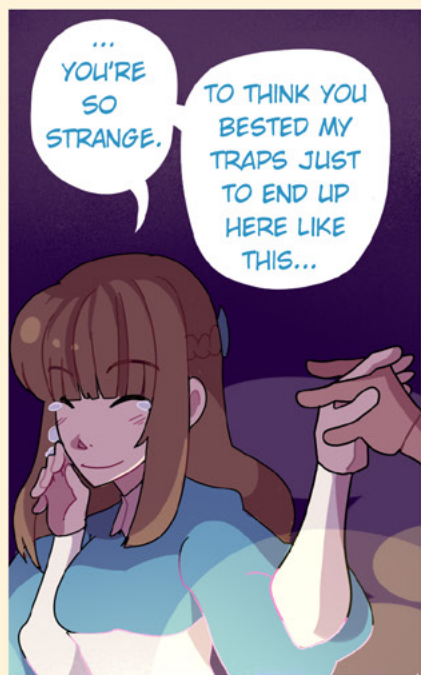


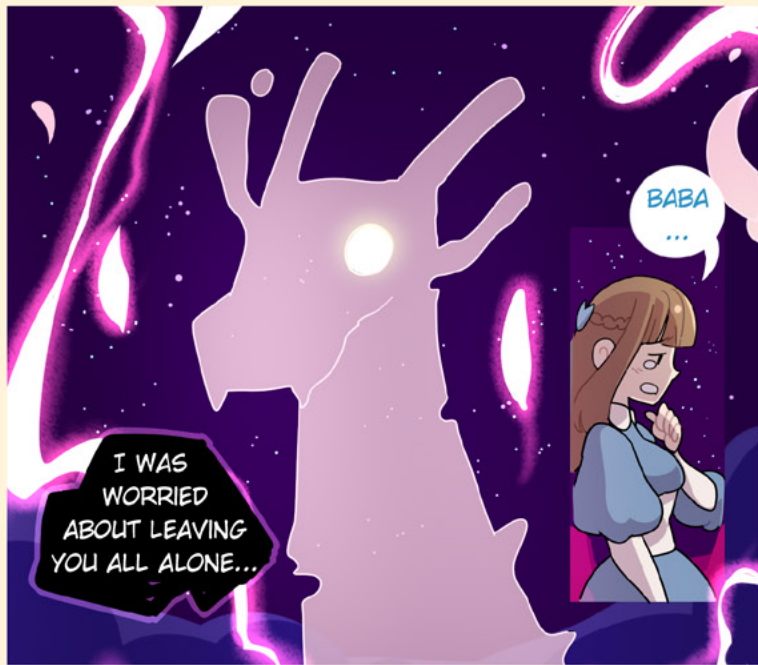
IT DOESN'T
HAVE TO ALWAYS
BE GOLD AND
SILVER.

YOU KNOW,
MAYBE THE
DRAGON'S
TREASURE
WAS SOME-
THING MORE?



SO I THINK-
MAYBE...







A FEW MONTHS LATER...



OH
MY
GOSH!

THIS NEW DUNGEON -
TRAINING PROGRAM
LOOKS REALLY COOL!

I HEAR SOME
OF THE TRAPS ARE
TO DIE FOR!



I'M REALLY
EXCITED FOR
THIS!

WHO KNEW THIS LITTLE TOWN
COULD BECOME SO HIP?!



BUSINESS WAS BOOMING IN THIS LITTLE TOWN.

AND I FOUND WORK SOON ENOUGH



EVERYONE WAS ABUZZ
ABOUT THE NEW, MODERN
DUNGEON-TRAINING TOWER.

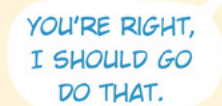
ADVENTURER'S
CAME FROM FAR
AND WIDE TO
EXPERIENCE IT.



SONYA!
THERE YOU
ARE!

CAN YOU
SUMMON THE
BOSS FOR
ME?

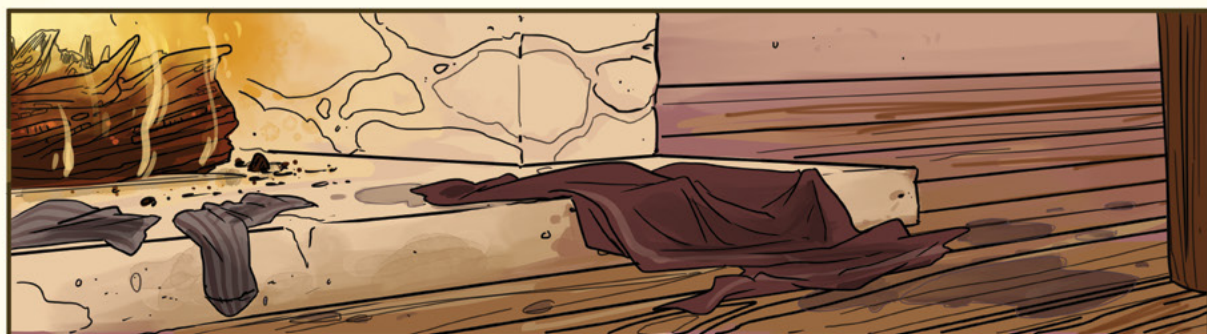
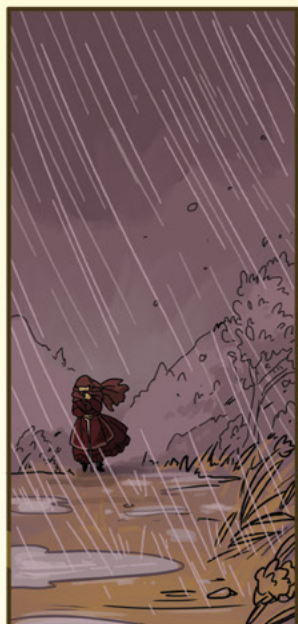
SURE!
LEAVE IT
TO ME!



The Black Bull

by Justin Lanjil





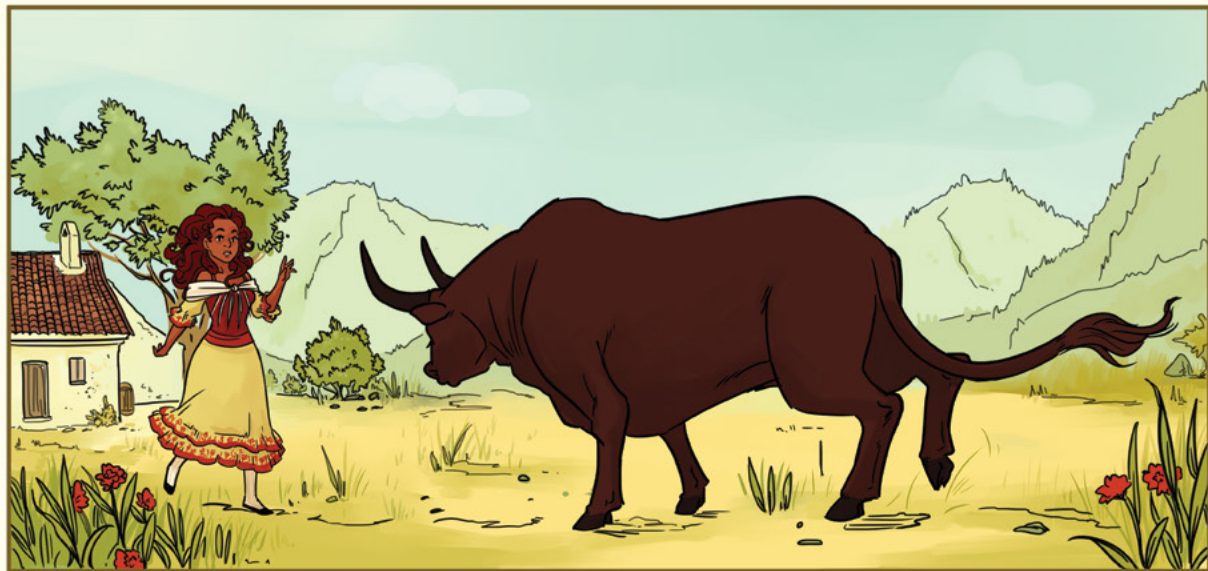
My thanks for
your hospitality
and shelter.

I have no
money to
repay your
kindness.

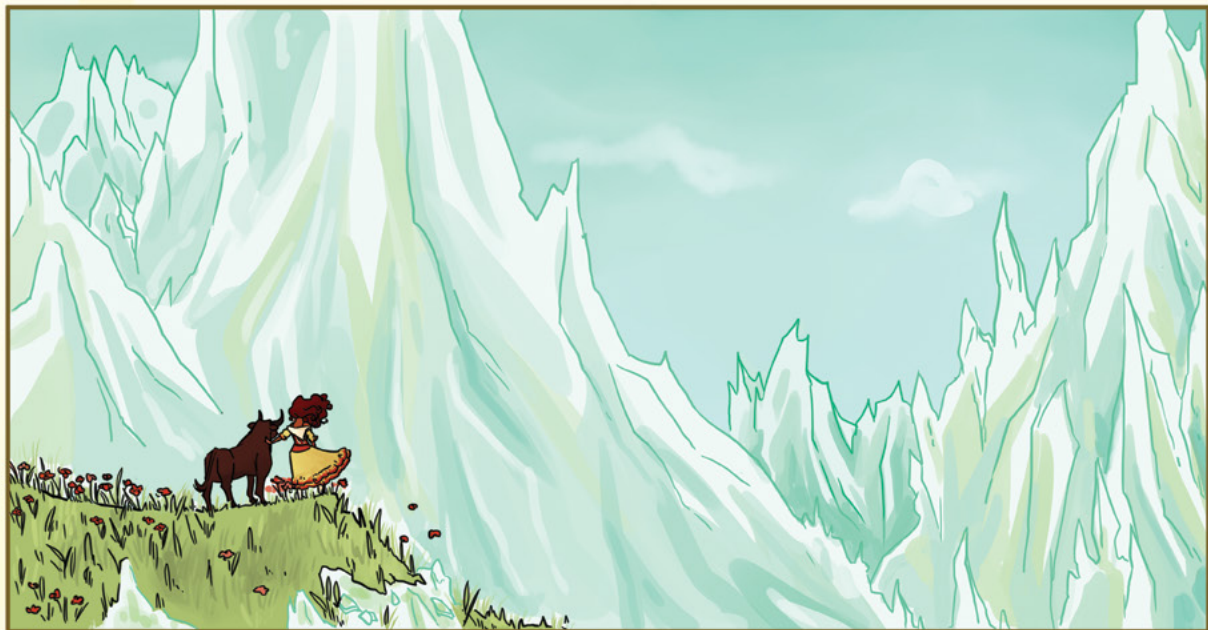
Allow me to
leave you with
words to guide
your future.

*Each morning, look out the window behind the house.
You will all three find the road to your fortune waiting.*









A demon
lurks in this
valley.

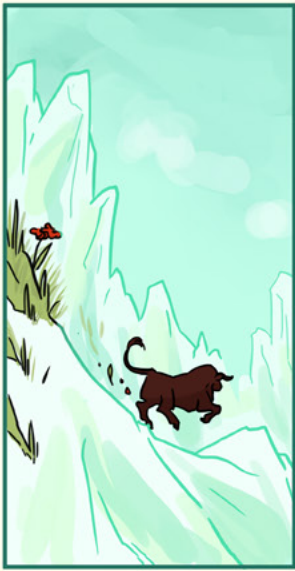


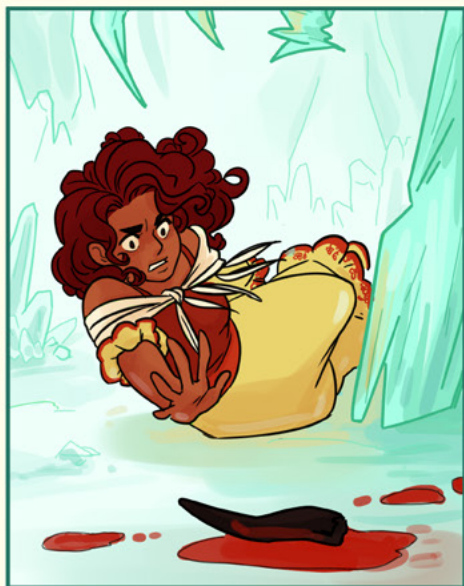
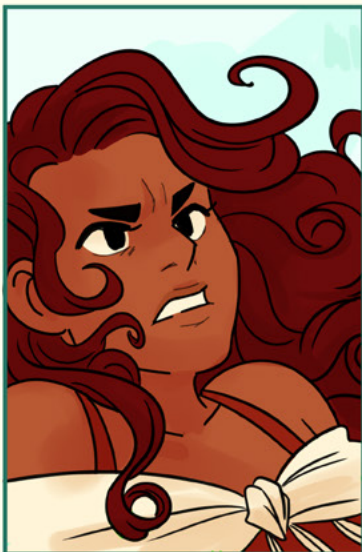
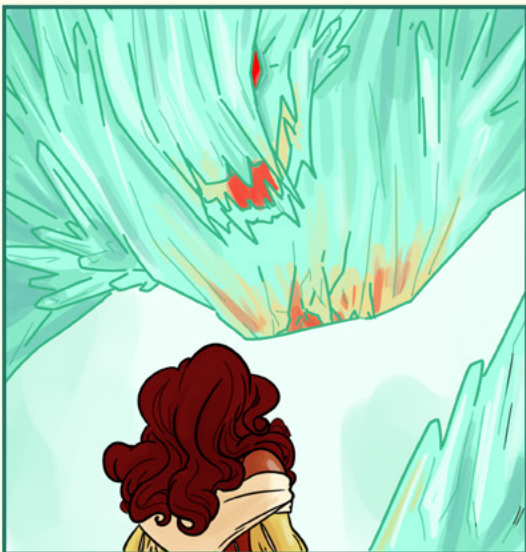
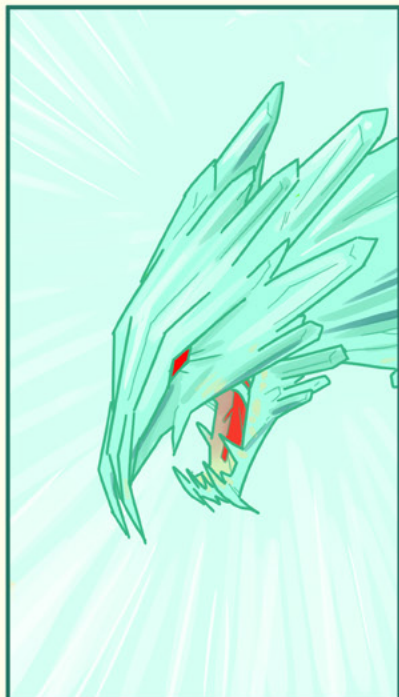
Watch
the sky and
wait.

If the blue
brightens,
then the demon
is slain and it
is safe.

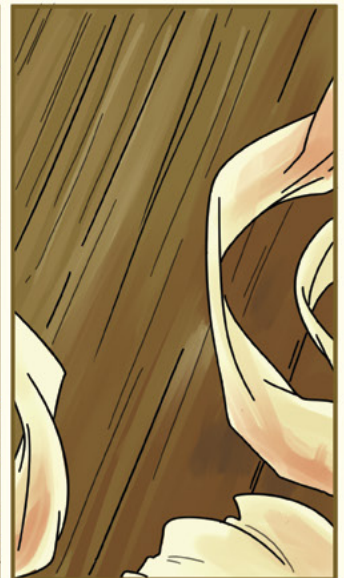
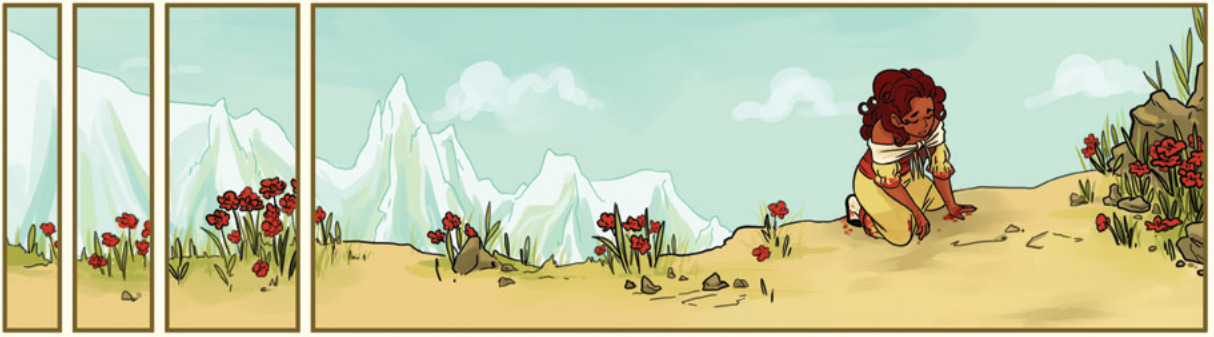
But if the sky
turns red I have lost
and you must not
venture near.

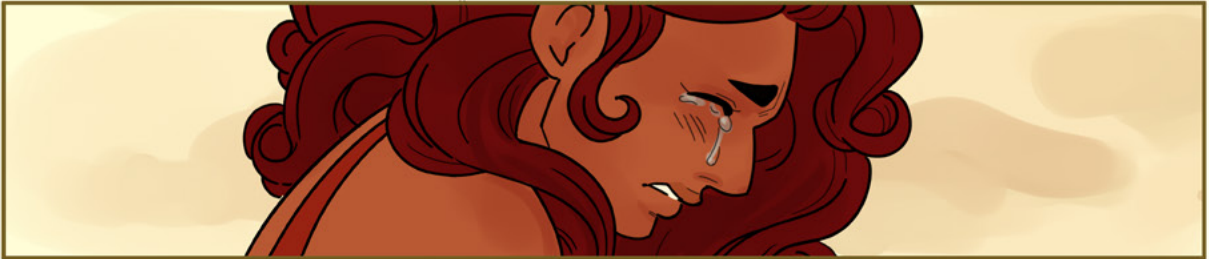
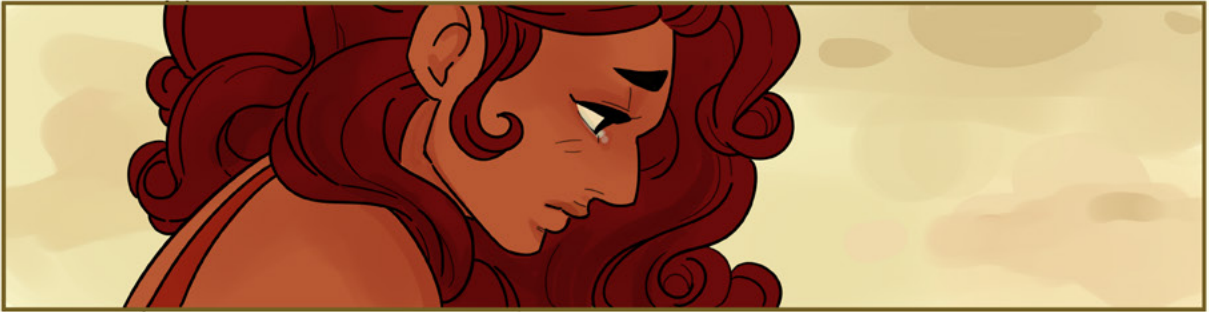


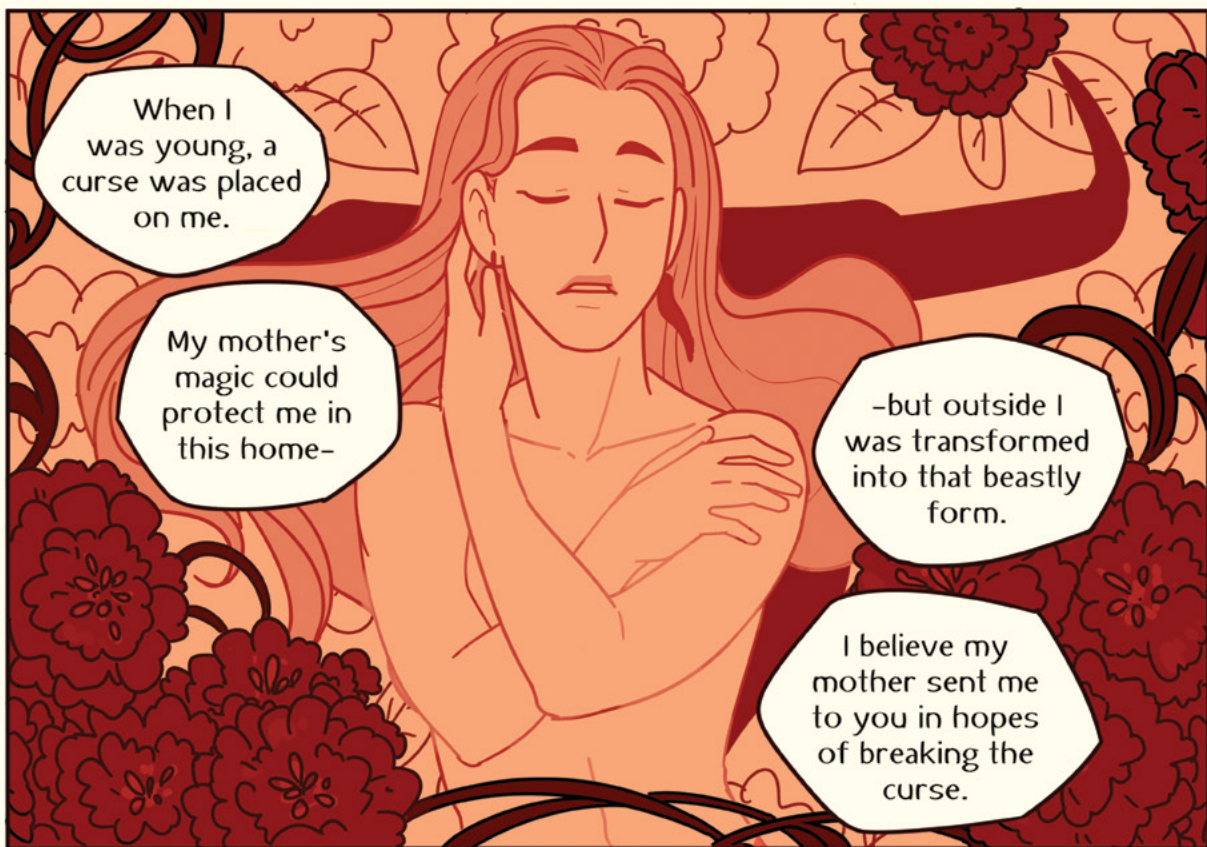
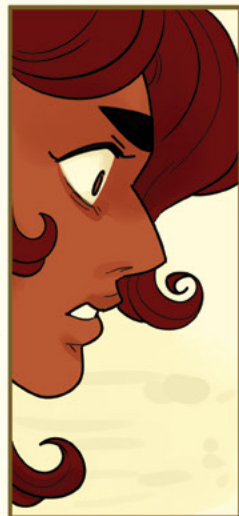
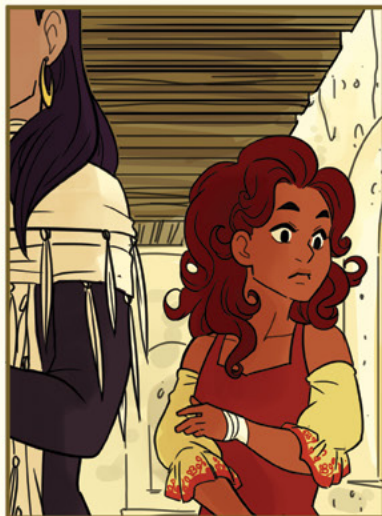










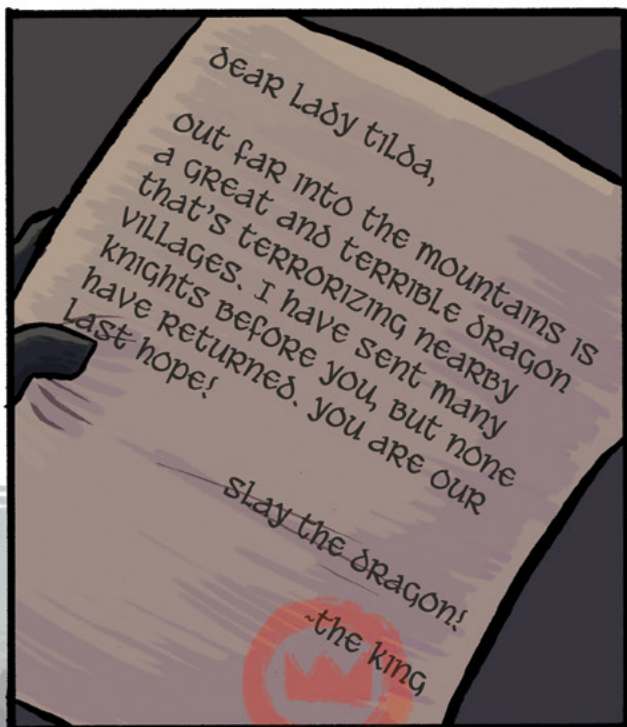
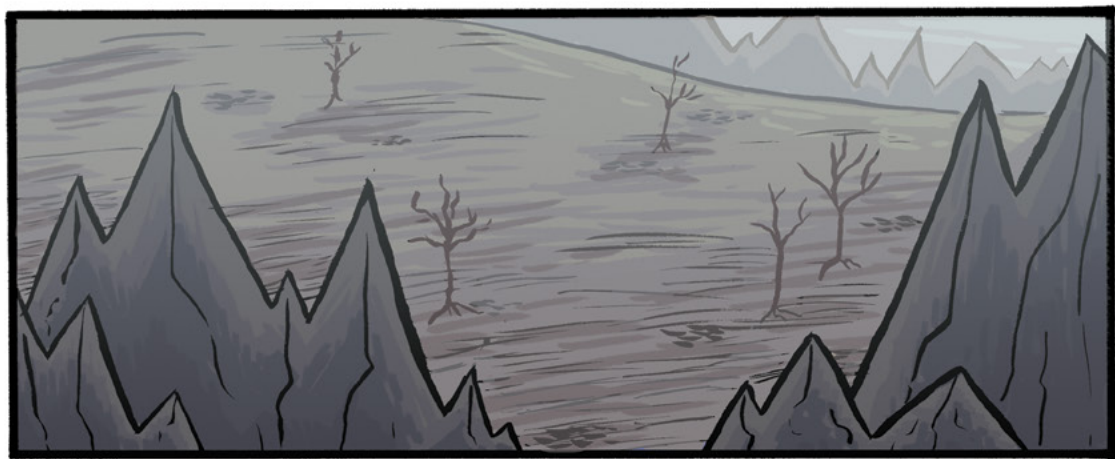


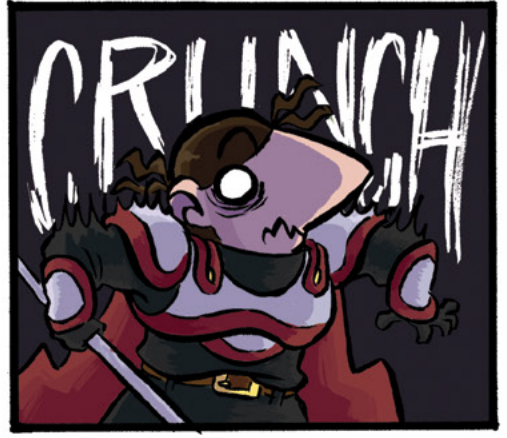
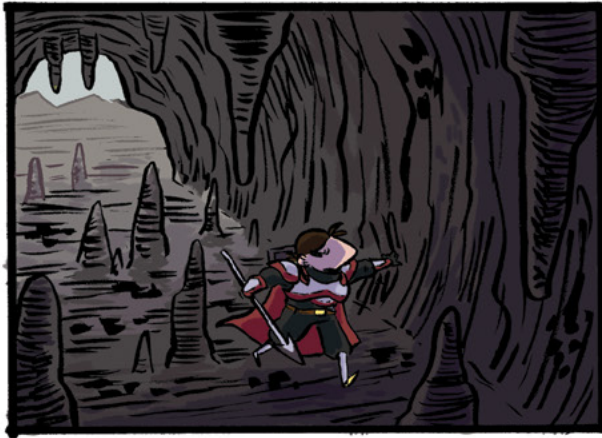
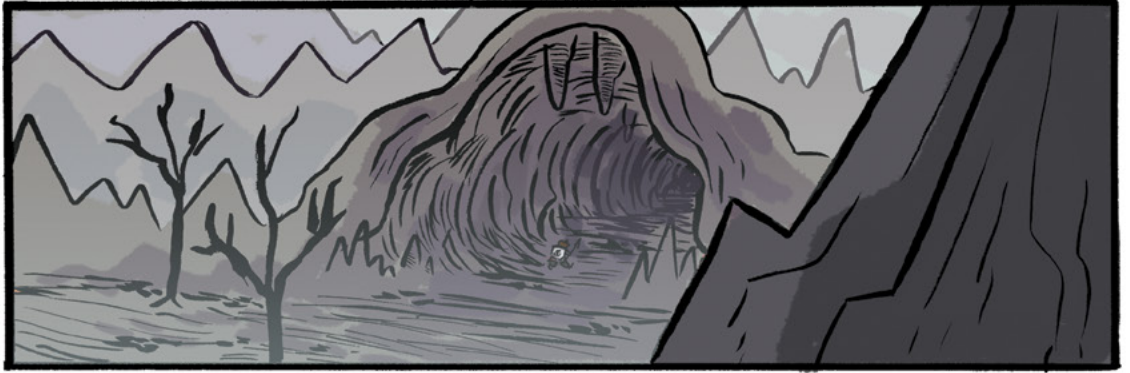


LADY TILDA AND THE DRAGON

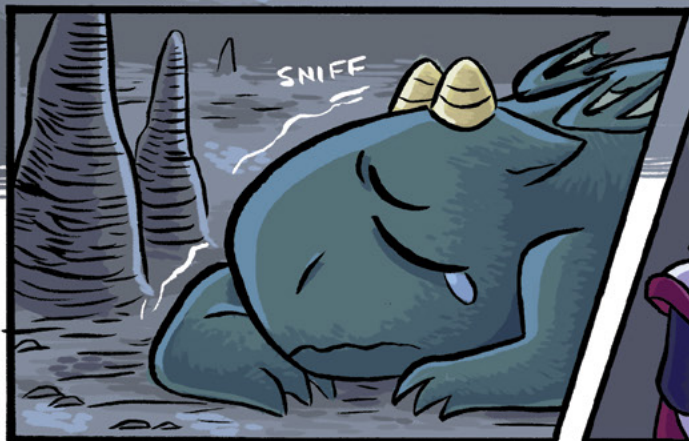
BY: SARA GOETTER

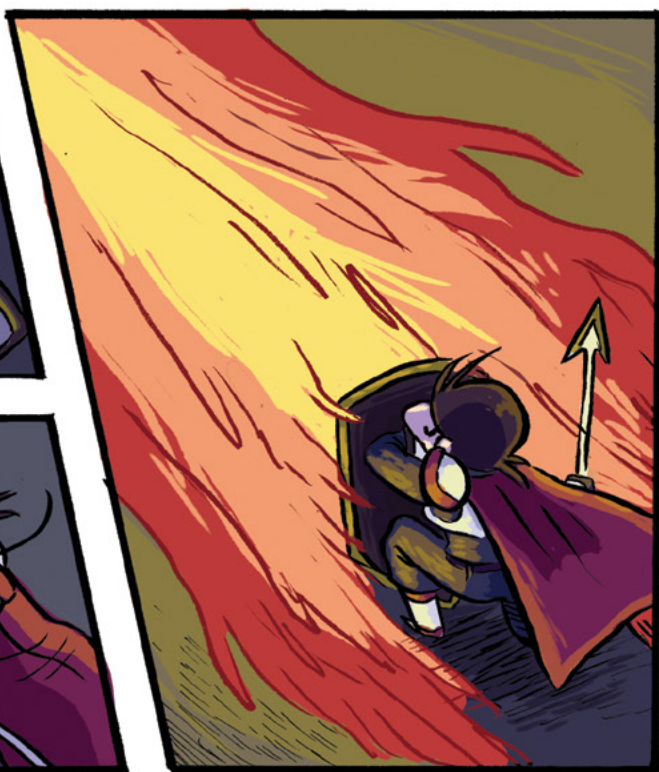
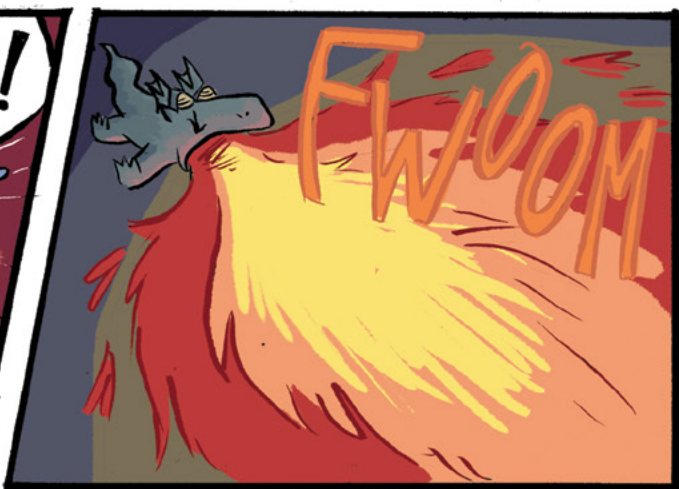
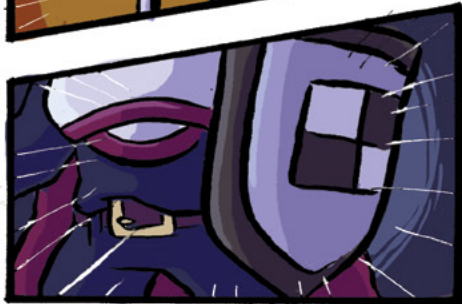
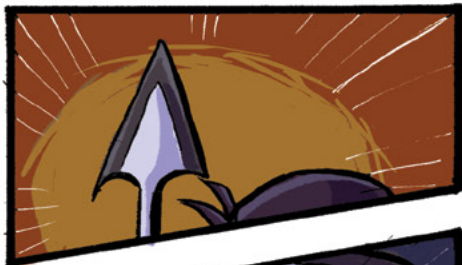
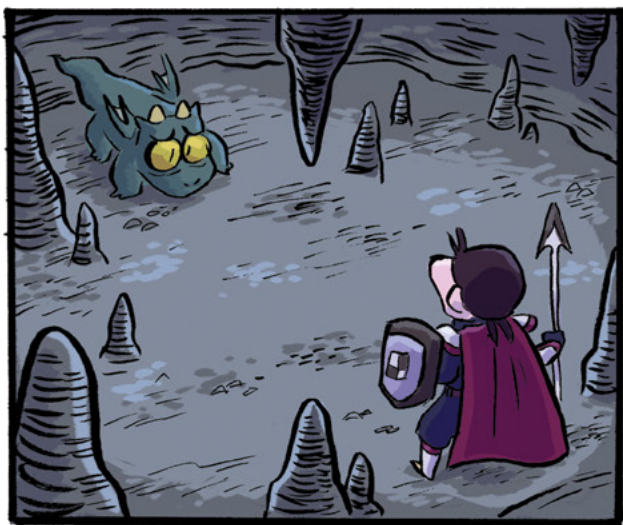


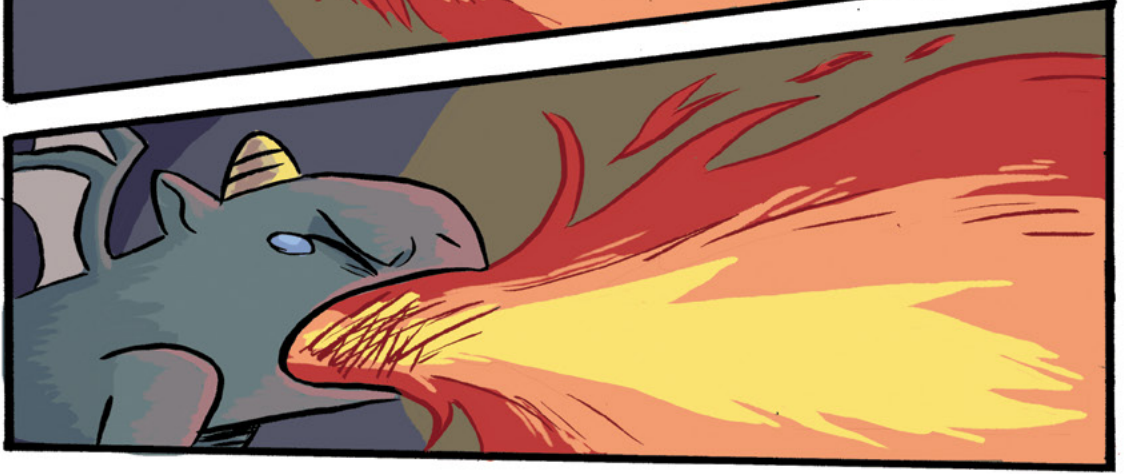


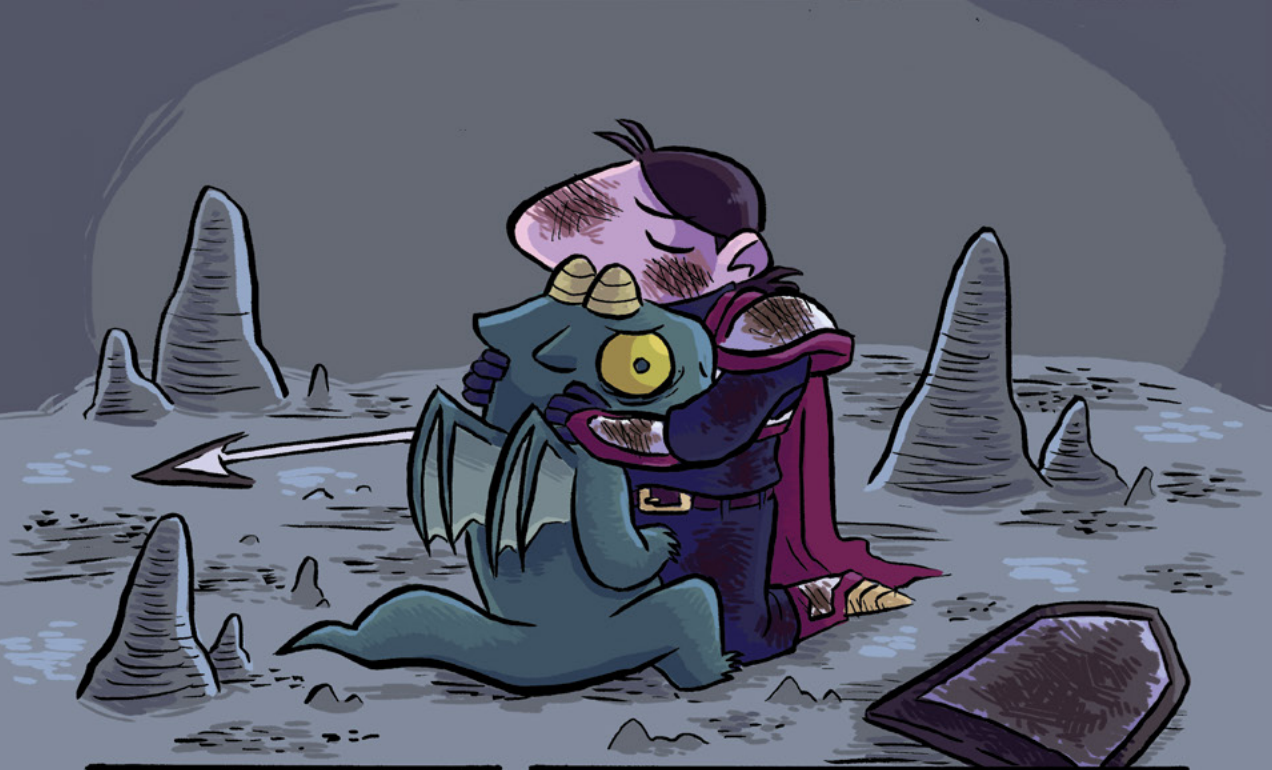


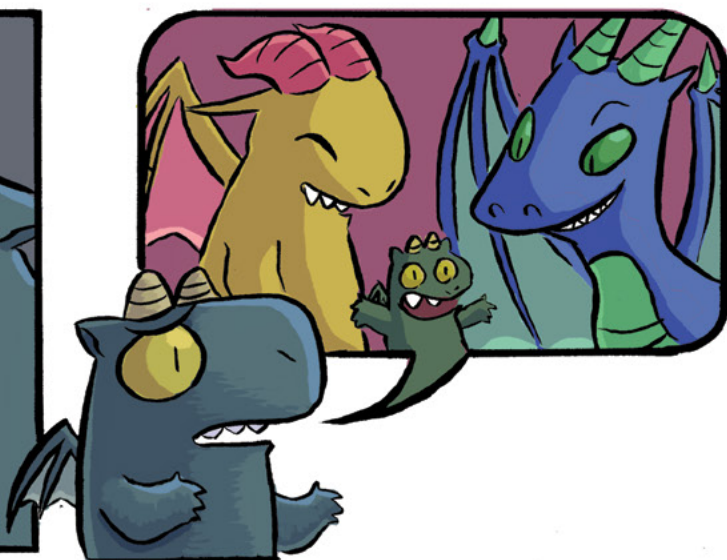
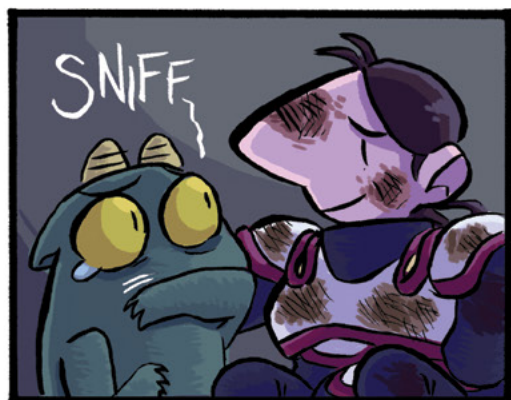

















THE END



Eggchild



Story by Ash Barnes | Art by Elena “Yamino” Barbarich



In the midst of the hot season and a terrible drought, in a land where all the seasons were hot and all the droughts similarly terrible, a girl named Zahra looked up at her mother and said, “Mama, I’m hungry.”

“Hungry is a reasonable thing to be, my little love,” said Zahra’s mother wearily, looking out the door of their hut. She and Zahra lived in a great grass sea, and the fields Zahra’s mother had tended for months and months were brown and barren, the crop wilted down to bundles of sticks and rattling leaves. Heat glittered like a gauzy fluttering web on the horizon. Zahra and her mother had had to content themselves with digging up hard, knobby roots from beneath the earth to eat. They tasted quite awful, but now even the roots were in short supply. Zahra’s belly ached for missing them.

Zahra’s mother rubbed her daughter’s head, brushing her thumb behind her ear where Zahra liked it best. Then she kissed Zahra on both cheeks and said, getting up, “I will go out and look for something to eat, yes I will, yes I will. So long as I live no child of mine will sit about starving, this I promise.”

Zahra only knew that starving was what had happened to her father some scattered seasons ago. He was buried under the earth like all the hard, knobby roots. She remembered him as but an echo of booming laughter, thunder in the sky, a hard shivery pressure up behind her heart.


Zahra rolled to her feet. She tugged her mother’s hand. “I’ll go with you!” she said.


“No, no,” said Zahra’s mother, and kissed her again. “No, my little love. Stay here. One of us must have the strength to cook what I bring back, yes?”

And oh, but Zahra was tired when she thought about it, heavy in her elbows and trembly in her knees. “Yes, Mama,” she said.

She fetched the carrying sling and helped her mother strap it across her chest, and from the door of their hut Zahra watched her mother walk out into the swaying yellow grasses. She watched a long, long time, until her eyes watered the hollows of her cheeks, until the shimmery smudge of her mother’s silhouette blurred to match all the others in the yawning distance.

Zahra took herself to bed. The light changed color in the window of the hut, first orange, then shy creeping russet.





“Like a good mango,” Zahra said into the quiet, “red, red, all red,” and she fell asleep dreaming of fruit, bushels and bushels of blushing ripe mangoes, her tongue moving against her teeth, her mouth open and hopeful.

Hours later, a hand found her shoulder and shook it. Zahra started awake and looked up: the hut’s window was full of twinkling pinprick stars. In the darkness a shadow moved. The shadow whispered, “My little love, look, look. You won’t starve, didn’t I promise?”

“Mama?” said Zahra, fumbling for flint and striker. Her mother—because that’s who the shadow was—found them first, and she dragged them together and made sparks leap onto the kindling in the hut’s firepit. Soon little flames had joined their hot yellow hands together. They went dancing about in the dried leaves. Light eeled across the walls of the hut in ribbons, and Zahra’s mother beamed down at her daughter, trembling and sweating, her smile a wide white moon’s slice floating in the fragile dark.

“Look,” Zahra’s mother said again. “Look what I found, Zahra. We’re saved, we’re saved.”


Her carrying sling hung huge and bulging and taut over her lap. She opened it. She showed Zahra what was inside.


“An egg!” said Zahra, but saying that felt like saying *cat* when looking at a leopard.

The egg was enormous, bigger than both of Zahra’s hands with all the fingers spread out: bigger than her head and her chest, bigger than the swooping breadth of her shoulders. It was blue the same way the dawn sky is blue, flecked with chips of shimmering violet and swirled pale, pale pink toward its tapering top. Zahra touched it with tentative fingertips and could only yank her hand back, yelping her shock.

“Mama!” she cried. “It’s so hot!” And the egg was hot, hot as the hut’s dooryard come early afternoon; hot as dry, dry ground wormed through with cracks; hot as bits of quartz left to glow and gleam in a window.

Though she was so desperately hungry that her stomach rolled up rumbling under her ribs, Zahra looked fretfully at the egg. She stared at it, at its colors, its semblance to the sky: she hovered her hand over it again, marveling at its insistent radiant heat. A thread of unease spun its spool over her heart.





“Mama, where did you find it?” she asked. And she added, “Maybe... maybe we shouldn’t eat it. It seems special.” What she meant was that it seemed so special that someone—or something—might miss it, and come looking for it.

Zahra’s mother’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “It’s special enough to feed you, yes. A blessing is what it is,” she said, “a gift,” and out came the cooking skillet, settled on a grate over the hut’s little fire. Hefting the egg in her hands, Zahra’s mother said a final time, “A gift. Life.”

She cracked it open. The yolk spilled out liquid and runny and golden, the same as any ordinary egg. It cooked like an ordinary egg and smelled like an ordinary egg, and it tasted like an ordinary egg but better, if only because Zahra had not had ordinary eggs in such a long, long time. She and her mother sat huddled around the fire in their hut and they ate the egg, every bite. They licked the shell afterward, even.

When it was gone, Zahra and her mother crawled into their blankets and folded themselves into each other’s arms, watching the fire die. The shards of the egg lay scattered around the embers. Zahra picked up the largest shard, like a broken bit of the sky, and cradled it in her palms, and felt the last bit of warmth in the shell fade away to nothing.


Her stomach full but her heart in a strange agony, Zahra closed her eyes.

Her mother said then into the darkness, “There was another egg. I could not carry both.”

Zahra’s stomach pitched and rolled. She was afraid without being able to explain why. “Leave it,” she whispered to her mother. “Leave it alone. One was enough. We’ll find other food, Mama. Please? Please leave it alone?”

Zahra’s mother kissed her ear. She squeezed Zahra under the blankets and sighed... and said nothing.

Two days later, a monster flew down and snatched Zahra’s mother into the sky as she tried to steal the second egg. Small blessings: Zahra didn’t see it happen. She was digging in the earth near the hut looking for still more roots, and her mother had gone away to forage again despite Zahra’s pleas. A trio of travelers crossing the great grass sea had glimpsed the whole thing, however, and when they came upon Zahra’s hut and Zahra herself later, they





described it to her well enough.

“The monster’s wings blocked out the sun,” said one.

“It made a terrible screeching, screaming noise,” said the other, “and the noise was almost like words.”

“This fell from the monster’s claws, from the person it took,” said the third traveler, and the other two grew silent and solemn. The third villager pulled from his robe Zahra’s mother’s carrying sling, torn now, stained. He draped it gently across Zahra’s lap, and inside Zahra found more sky-colored shards like those that had come from the egg, though these were wet and sticky and freshly broken. Spoiled golden yolk trickled out of the sling.

Zahra put her face into her hands and wept.

The travelers comforted her as best as they were able. They shared with her a little bag of dried meat and on her fire they heated a pot of couscous, pouring the precious grains through careful fingers. They fed her what they could spare, and some of what they could not. “Come with us,” they said together, huddled around her hut’s fire as night swept over the great grass sea. “Here it is so hot and so dry. The sun burns the life from everything. We are going to another country, Zahra, a place where it is not so hot and never so dry. A country where there is green everywhere.”

Zahra, who did not know if green was a food or an animal or a kind of plant, shook her head.


“Zahra, please,” the travelers said. “If you stay here alone, you will starve.”


In her head Zahra heard the faint echo of her father’s laughter. In her head Zahra heard her mother say, “A blessing. A gift.”

She shook her head again, and though the travelers pleaded with her until the stars washed out of the sky, the next day they left her hut numbering still only three.

For days Zahra grieved. When she could be bothered to try for the sake of her begging belly, she attempted digging up more roots to gnaw. Sometimes she found them. Often she found only rocks. Eventually the blade of her hoe broke off its wooden handle, and she turned around and said, “Mama, how do I fix—” before remembering her mother was no longer there to answer her.

She cried. Not much: there was water to be had from a well near the hut’s western wall, but it was hard for someone as weakened by hunger as Zahra to turn the crank to bring the bucket up from the





bottom. So sometimes Zahra was too dry inside to squeeze out even the smallest tears.

She grew hungrier and hungrier until the ache of her appetite kept her from sleeping, and that was a terrible, terrible thing. The worst thing, in fact, for only in dreams could she hope to see her mother again.

The moon grew in the sky night by night. When it was full at last, Zahra stepped out of her hut, her mother's tattered carrying sling around her neck. She looked out across the rippling grasses. She looked the direction the travelers had gone, with their dried meat and their couscous and their hopes of finding a green country. Then she looked in the direction her mother had gone, the way of sky-colored eggs and winged monsters that screeched and screamed and were big enough to block the sun.

She began to walk.

Near noon the next day, so weak she could barely stand, Zahra felt the ground go out from beneath her feet. She stumbled and rolled down, down, down, scattering rocks and clay and empty seed pods, and she finally fetched up in a huge bowl-shaped pit hidden under the waving, rustling stalks of the great grass sea.

The pit was wide enough to have hidden her whole hut inside it. The floor of it was lined with soft dirt and a thick carpet of softer feathers: not a pit, then, but a nest.

Upside down on her back in the middle of the feathers, Zahra trembled. Her heart shuddered and quaked in her chest. "Wings," she croaked, remembering what the traveler had said. Bits of down flew from her lips and wafted away. "Wings that blocked the sun."

In the stippled half-darkness of the nest, something moved. A big something. A shadow fell over Zahra.


She looked up. A monster—the monster—looked back down at her, a winged beast greater in size than a cow, with gleaming golden eyes and a beak sharp as a skinning knife. That beak opened and it hissed at her, its tongue a narrow dart, its throat a horrible pink chasm. Zahra dug her heels into the soft feathery bottom of the nest and tried to push herself away from the beast, and it hissed at her again, a sound that raised the hair on the back of her neck, a sound that hurt her ears, a sound that—

A sound that was *words*. The beast was *talking*.

"Begone, pluckchild!" said the beast, and she scored the ground







between Zahra's feet with curved, plated talons as yellow as the grass overhead. "Foul naked chick! Go! Get out of my nest or I'll eat you! I'll rip you to pieces! I'll—"

The beast's eyes found Zahra's torn carrying sling. Her pupils—dark slanted wells—narrowed to pinpoints. She arched her neck and dropped her head alongside Zahra's, her quilled breast heaving, her breath smelling of hot, hot wind and wet fetid meat. Her beak opened again. Zahra thought the beast would sink the hook of it through her heart, tear her open, take her life away.

Instead the beast hissed, "Want to steal my eggs, do you? Too bad, little pluckchild. They are gone, cracked and dead and done. I have no more."

And the beast withdrew in a boiling rush of feathers. She took herself to the far edge of the nest, where she tucked her wings over her face and pressed her beak into her forelegs, her golden eyes shut, her head bowed. She trembled as Zahra had trembled before, and a wrenching noise seeped from her throat, filling the nest, forcing Zahra to sit up and stare.

"Are you crying?" she asked the beast.


"My children were taken," the beast replied, and from her eyes trickled tears indeed. "Yes, foul chick, I am crying! My children—my eggs, yes, taken and broken and gone, both of them, by a horrible two-legged *thief*—"


"She wasn't horrible!" cried Zahra. She stood up and stomped over to the beast, though her strength was meager and her knees seesawed and wobbled. "She was wonderful and good and kind! She was my *mother*!"

The beast reared up over Zahra. Her feathers flared out in a quivering rainbow, shining reds and blues and purples like none Zahra had ever seen, and she screamed in a hoarse roaring snarl, "*She stole my children!*"

"To feed me!" Zahra screamed back. "She stole your eggs because I was starving and she wasn't horrible, she wasn't, she wasn't, she only wanted me not to be hungry *and you took her away from me!*"

Unable to stand anymore, Zahra sat down hard on the nest's carpet of feathers. She felt as dry inside as a fire must feel, and yet she hiccupped and choked and her sorrow came pouring out of her in a river of retching sobs. She wrapped her arms tight around herself.





She shook and she shook, her belly a shrunken husk, her heart aching fit to burst.

The beast was still as long as it took Zahra to cry. She could have dispatched Zahra in one snap of her beak, maybe two, but instead she waited until Zahra had mostly quieted to say, her voice heavy and thick with a grief not unlike Zahra's own, "Why did you come here, pluckchild? To get revenge? To try to kill the creature that killed your mother? Is that it?"

"I don't know what *revenge* means," said Zahra miserably. "People... three people, they saw what you did to my mother. They told me. They said I should come with them to another country, a green country, but I don't know what *green* is either and they were nice but I didn't know them. I just know my mother's gone and she was all I had, and maybe your eggs were all you had and they're gone too, and I wondered..."

Zahra beat her dusty brown palms against her knees: once, twice. More tears oozed from the corners of her eyes. "I wondered," she said, "since I think you understand what it's like to lose everyone in the world you love, if maybe you might be able to tell me what I should do now."

Zahra looked up at the beast.

She said again, "What should I do now?"

The beast stared down at her in silence. Up close she was as beautiful as her eggs had been, the feathers of her face and neck and throat a riot of colors, her tawny pelt speckled and spotted and freckled. Her forelegs were a hawk's talons and yet her back feet were a lion's paws, and her tufted red tail swished through the feathers on the floor of the nest.


"Pluckchild," she said at last. "Do you have a name?"

"Zahra," said Zahra.

The beast studied her. Her red tail went swish, swish. Feathers drifted. The beast's eyes were wet. "Are you still hungry, Zahra?"

Zahra opened her mouth. Closed it. Her belly answered in her stead, groaning, and the beast snorted and huffed and rose. Her wings unfolded and flared, and with two mighty sweeps of them the beast was gone, sailing up and up out of the nest and through the grasses into the blue sky beyond, feathers fluttering everywhere.

For hours Zahra sat in the nest. She thought of leaving and going home, back to her hut, but when she tried to stand up her legs





collapsed beneath her and delivered her to the ground again.

The day dimmed. As the sun fell down into its slot on the horizon, the beast came flapping back into the nest. She landed by Zahra, shaking the ground, and from her talons she spilled into Zahra's lap a whole bushel of bright round red things, red as her tufted tail, red as the evening sky.

Mangoes.

"What do you think you should do now, little pluckchild?" said the beast, rending open the fruit with her claws. The scent of it was a bright tang in the gathering darkness, the sweet flesh a pale yellow like low, warm stars.

A gift, whispered her mother in Zahra's head. *Life*.

"I think I should eat," Zahra said, her mouth full of water. "It... may I eat? Mama, she—she would want me to eat. I want to. I want it."

The beast sighed. "Eat," she said, and as Zahra filled her belly the beast leaned in, closer and closer, looking at her from every side, and at last settled behind her, great spotted haunch tucked to Zahra's hip. With her beak she plucked feathers from Zahra's braids.

"I am sorry," the beast said at last, "that I took your mother away."


Her face and hands sticky with mango juice, Zahra said, "I'm sorry we took your eggs away too. Your babies." She closed her eyes. It was very dark behind the lids and her heartbeat thudded in her ears, and she said, feeling new tears slide down her face, "I'm so sorry. I am. But I'm angry too. At you! I'm so *angry* at you for what you did!"


"That is a feeling I share, pluckchild," said the beast, and in her haunch Zahra felt a quiver. "Yes, I am angry too. It is a very reasonable thing to be," and she sounded so like Zahra's mother that Zahra wept anew.

Neither of them moved from the other as night threw its purple shawl over the world. Feeling the slow, soft press of the beast's breath at her back, Zahra leaned little by little into a pillow of feathers and slept.

The next morning, after waking, Zahra made as though to climb out of the nest. When the beast stirred and asked her where she was going, Zahra said, "Home. I'm going home."

"At least eat first," said the beast in reply, and so Zahra did, and as juice dribbled down her chin she looked at the beast, full of anger,





full of food, full of loss: fuller still of questions.

“What are you?” she asked, studying the beast’s differing feet, her feathers, her tail.

“I am strong,” said the beast. She stretched and flexed her wings. “My feathers are the sweeping clouds and the roar of the wind” — and she sounded very proud of herself, and she bobbed her head and somehow Zahra found a smile growing on her face, watching her — “and I am the furious scalding sun. Naked little pluckchildren like you call me a skylion.”

“My mother used to tell me stories about magic creatures with names like that. Are you magic? Can you... can you make the sky do what you want?”

“No,” said the skylion. “But the sky is my kingdom, and I can go anywhere in it that I wish to go.”

Zahra looked around the nest, the mangoes both halved and whole: up, then, at the sky, flat and blue and going on forever. “How big is the sky?” she asked.


“Bigger than anything,” said the skylion. “Bigger than everything. The sky... it wraps up the whole world, and the stars are in it like little seeds, and all those seeds hold every light and every color, and —”


And the skylion said so many interesting things that Zahra could only listen until it grew dark again. She listened from one day to the next, and the next, and the day after that, over and over. She and the skylion talked together and they walked together, and though Zahra still missed her mother and longed to see her again, the hole in her heart that was her mother’s absence did at least hurt a little less when the skylion fussed at her, or cleaned her braids, or told her stories, or tucked a wing over her at night to shield her from the mosquitoes and other biting insects.

One day — many, many days after she had found the nest in the first place — Zahra climbed from the nest and went back through the great grass sea until she came to the hut she had shared with her mother. The skylion made a looming shadow overhead. She watched Zahra touch the hut’s walls, the little window, the crank of the well.

The skylion landed in the dooryard. Zahra went to her, wiping away tears, and the skylion said, “Do you wish for me to leave you here?”

“No,” said Zahra. “No, please.” She scrubbed her hands over





her face. “Mama’s gone,” she said, “and I thought that meant everyone in the world I loved was gone, but then I found you. Please don’t leave me.” She clutched at the skylion’s feathers and buried her face in them, and the skylion huffed and clicked her beak and arched her neck over Zahra, nipping soft at the space behind Zahra’s ear where Zahra’s mother had always pressed a loving thumb.

“No,” the skylion. “No, little Zahra, little chick. No, I won’t leave you.”

They looked at the sky together, then, the sweeping blue bowl of it. “Can we go to the green country?” asked Zahra. “Somewhere new and good?” And what she meant was somewhere without torn slings or shattered shells. Zahra said, “You said the sky wraps up the whole world. Let’s go see it. Let’s go see green.”

The skylion cast her gaze over the dry waves of the great grass sea, the yellow stalks, the hard broken ground, the rocks jutting up like cruel blunt teeth. Zahra’s fingers slid through her feathers.

“Yes,” said the skylion, turning into her touch. “Yes, my chick. Let’s go.”

Zahra clambered up behind her wings and held tight to her, and they flew up, up, up into the sky. They climbed the clouds, and anyone watching them would have seen them grow smaller and smaller until they were but another flicker of heat dancing on the horizon, the only thing left of either of them a whisper of laughter and a few fluttering feathers.





Red Riding Hood

story and art by
Meaghan Carter













Don't fear the hand
of dark, my child



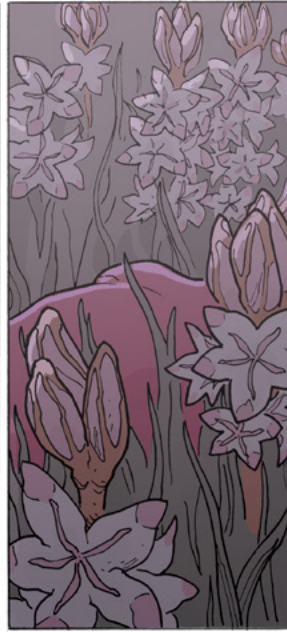
Follow his midnight
bell.



Because the dark
comes for all of us



Even in beds
of asphodel.



East Of The Sun



West Of The Moon

-BY MORGAN BEEM







ONE NIGHT, THE BEAR
CAME FOR ME.

IF I WENT,



HE PROMISED TO MAKE MY FAMILY
WEALTHY IN RETURN.




I AGREED, AND WE JOURNEYED
TO HIS CASTLE.



WE LIVED HAPPILY.









I HAD FAILED, HE
EXPLAINED.


IF ONLY I HAD BEEN PATIENT
A LITTLE LONGER.



AND NOT LOOKED AT HIM,
HIS CURSE WOULD HAVE
BEEN BROKEN.



BUT NOW HE HAD TO GO,




TO THE PALACE THAT WAS
EAST OF THE SUN AND WEST
OF THE MOON.


TO MARRY THE TROLL QUEEN.



I GRIEVED.



AND THEN I KNEW WHAT I HAD TO DO.









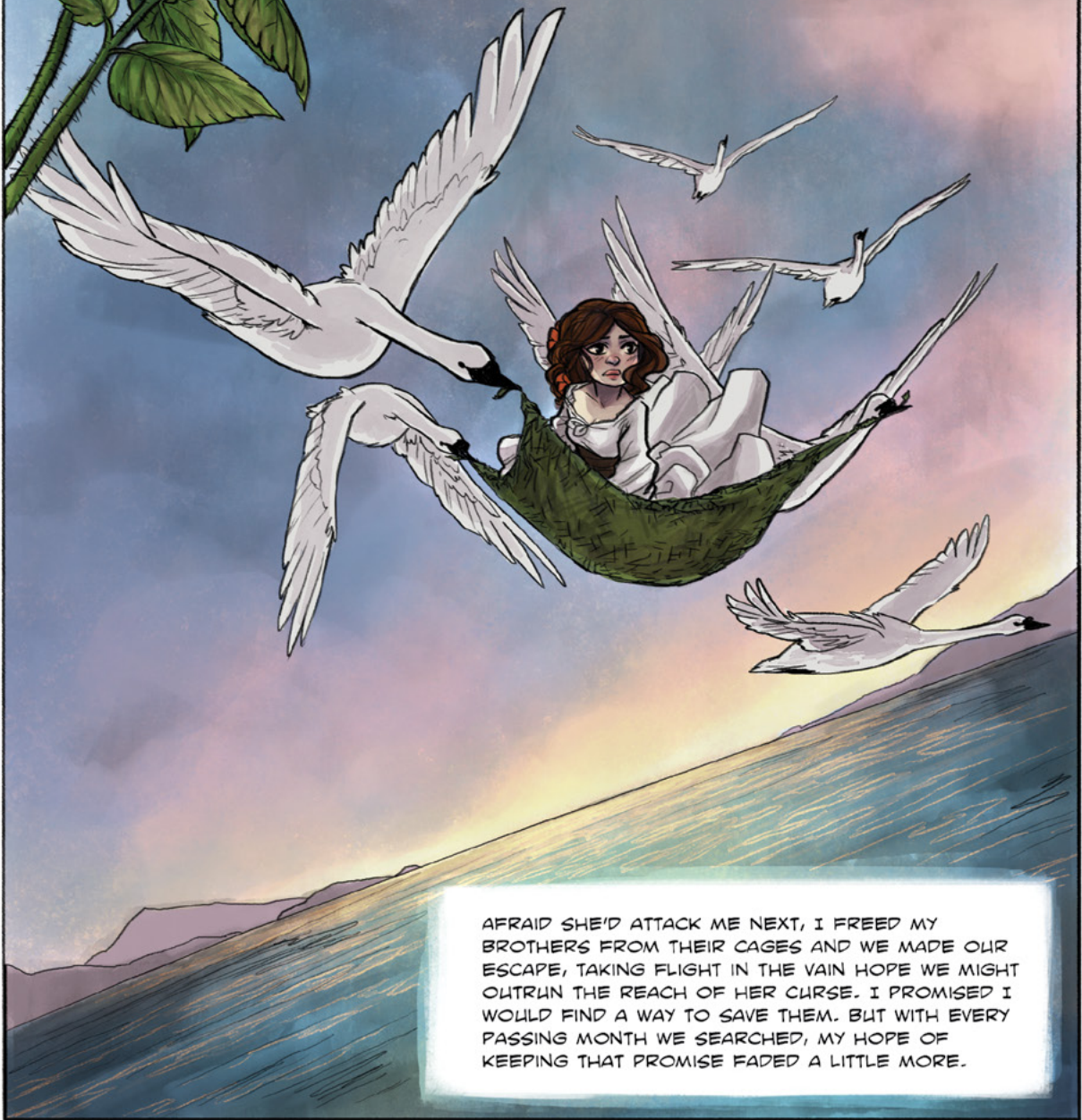
The Nettle-Witch

BY NICOLE CHARTRAND
ADAPTED FROM HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON'S
"THE WILD SWANS"

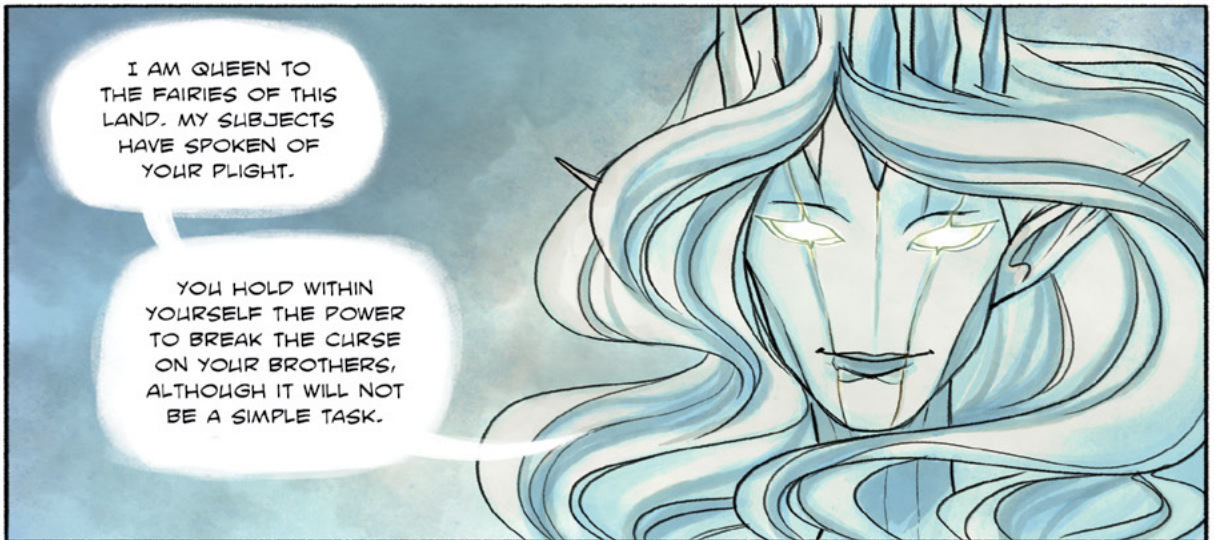
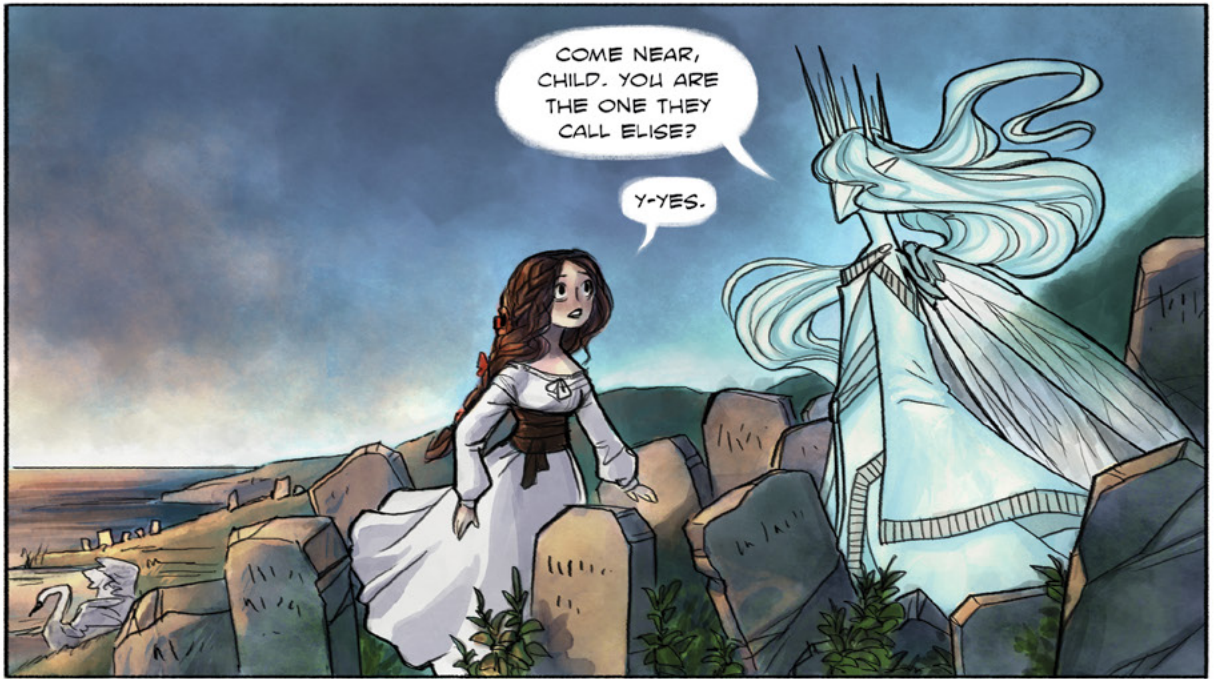
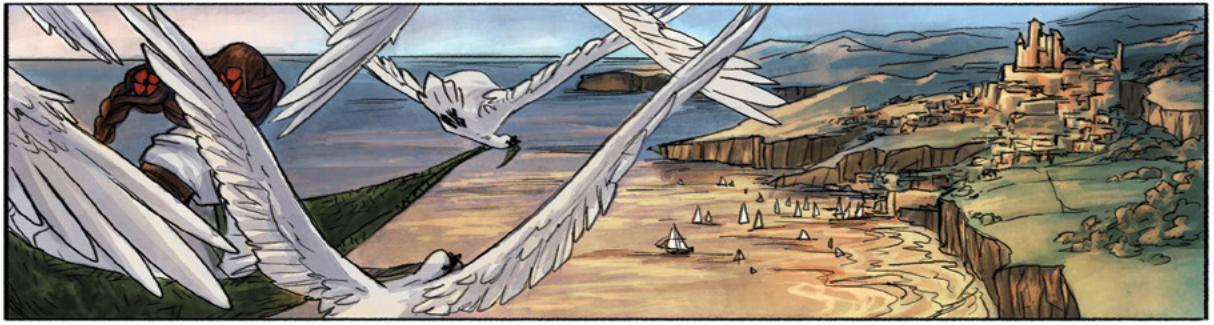


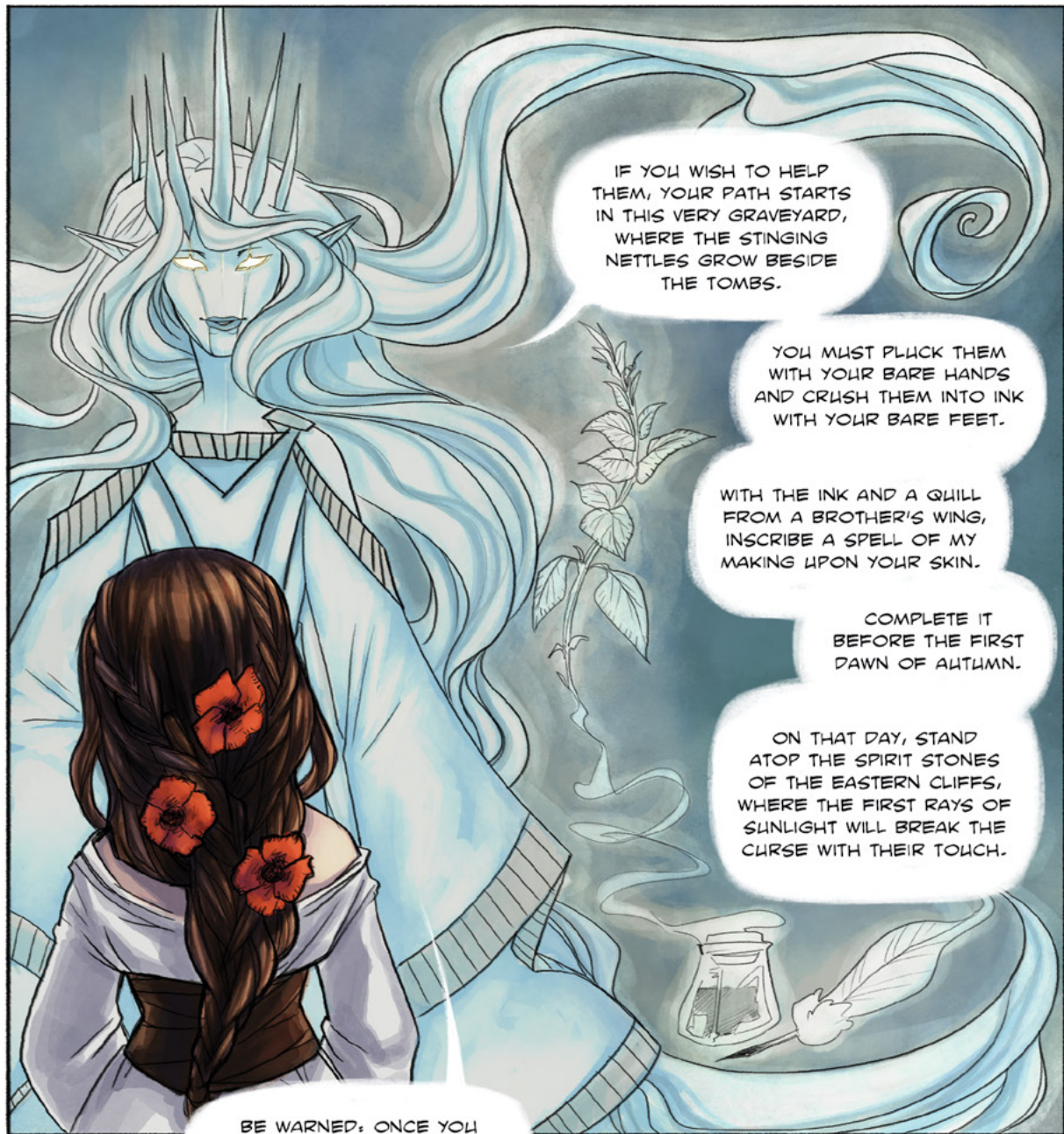
WHEN I WAS A CHILD, MY MOTHER FELL ILL AND DIED. MY FATHER, A WEALTHY MERCHANT, SOON REMARRIED, SEDUCED BY A WITCH WHO POISONED HIS MIND AND BODY UNTIL HE WAS NO MORE THAN A PUPPET. SHE THEN BEGAN TRYING TO MANIPULATE HIS CHILDREN IN TURN.

WE KNEW WHAT SHE'D DONE AND WE WOULDN'T GIVE IN. THIS, THE DAY BEFORE MY ELDEST BROTHER CAME OF AGE, SHE TURNED HER MAGIC UPON US. WHILE I SOMEHOW MANAGED TO HIDE FROM HER, MY SEVEN BROTHERS WERE NOT SO LUCKY. DOWN TO THE LAST, THE WITCH CHANGED THEM INTO SWANS AND LOCKED THEM AWAY.



AFRAID SHE'D ATTACK ME NEXT, I FREED MY BROTHERS FROM THEIR CAGES AND WE MADE OUR ESCAPE, TAKING FLIGHT IN THE VAIN HOPE WE MIGHT OUTFLY THE REACH OF HER CURSE. I PROMISED I WOULD FIND A WAY TO SAVE THEM. BUT WITH EVERY PASSING MONTH WE SEARCHED, MY HOPE OF KEEPING THAT PROMISE FADED A LITTLE MORE.





IF YOU WISH TO HELP THEM, YOUR PATH STARTS IN THIS VERY GRAVEYARD, WHERE THE STINGING NETTLES GROW BESIDE THE TOMBS.

YOU MUST PLUCK THEM WITH YOUR BARE HANDS AND CRUSH THEM INTO INK WITH YOUR BARE FEET.

WITH THE INK AND A QUILL FROM A BROTHER'S WING, INSCRIBE A SPELL OF MY MAKING UPON YOUR SKIN.

COMPLETE IT BEFORE THE FIRST DAWN OF AUTUMN.

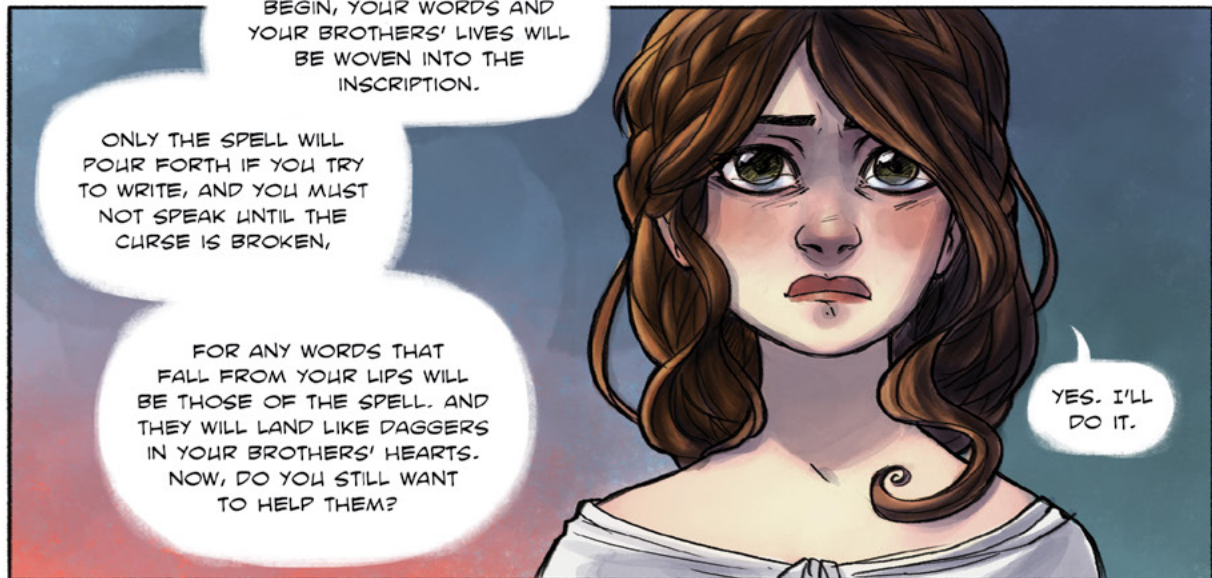
ON THAT DAY, STAND ATOP THE SPIRIT STONES OF THE EASTERN CLIFFS, WHERE THE FIRST RAYS OF SUNLIGHT WILL BREAK THE CURSE WITH THEIR TOUCH.

BE WARNED: ONCE YOU BEGIN, YOUR WORDS AND YOUR BROTHERS' LIVES WILL BE WOVEN INTO THE INSCRIPTION.

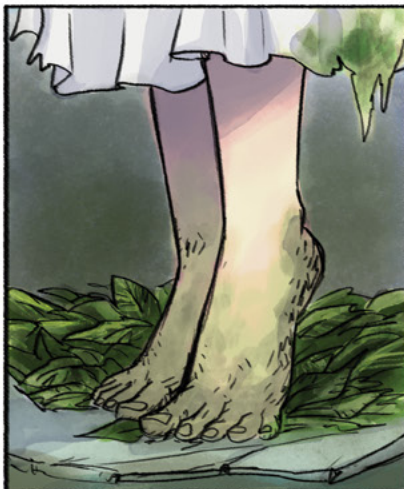
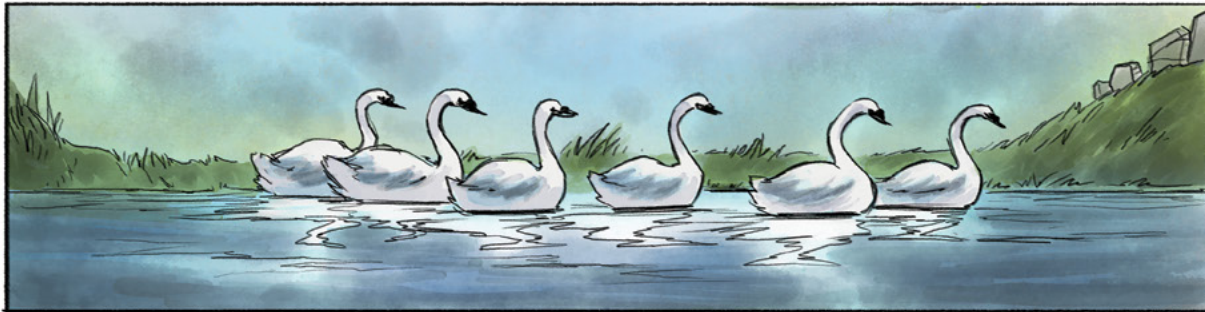
ONLY THE SPELL WILL POUR FORTH IF YOU TRY TO WRITE, AND YOU MUST NOT SPEAK UNTIL THE CURSE IS BROKEN,

FOR ANY WORDS THAT FALL FROM YOUR LIPS WILL BE THOSE OF THE SPELL. AND THEY WILL LAND LIKE DAGGERS IN YOUR BROTHERS' HEARTS. NOW, DO YOU STILL WANT TO HELP THEM?

YES. I'LL DO IT.



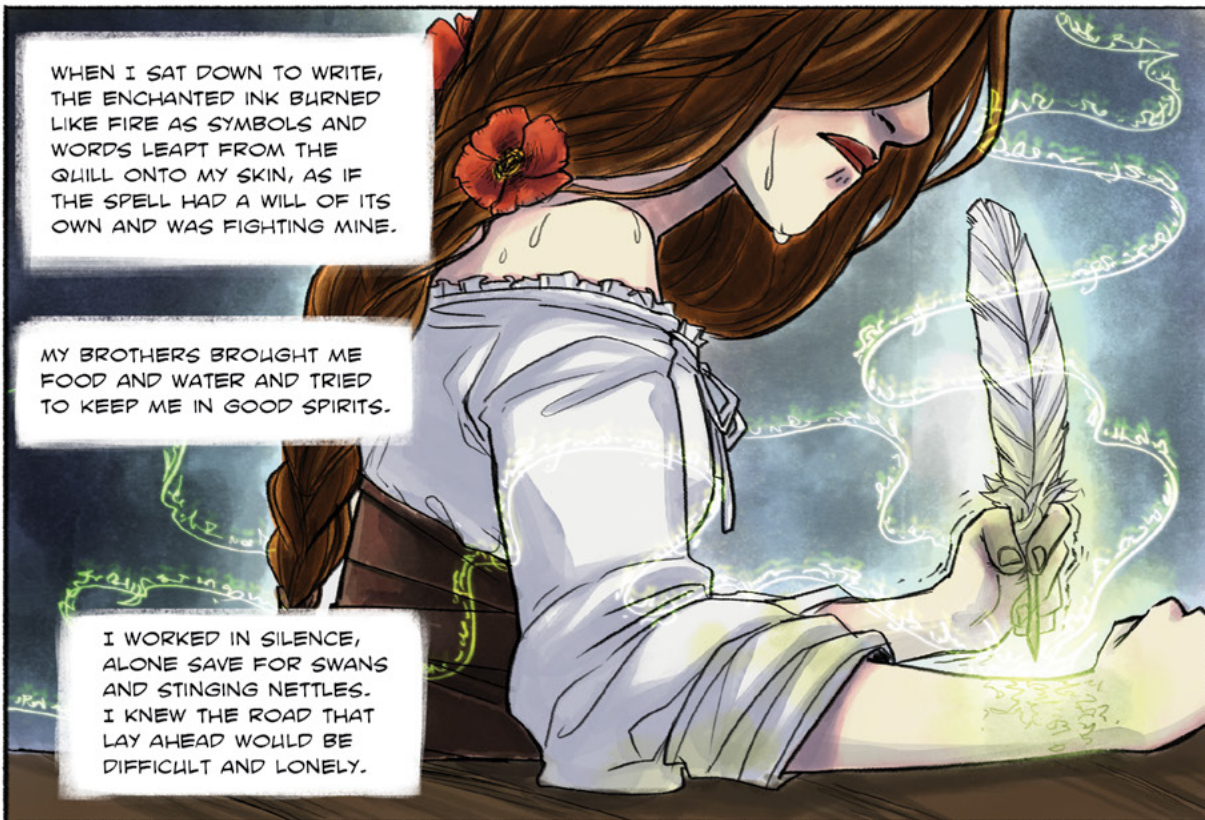
VERY WELL.
I SHALL GIVE YOU
THE WORDS OF THE
INSCRIPTION. USE THEM
WISELY, ELISE.



WHEN I SAT DOWN TO WRITE,
THE ENCHANTED INK BURNED
LIKE FIRE AS SYMBOLS AND
WORDS LEAPT FROM THE
QUILL ONTO MY SKIN, AS IF
THE SPELL HAD A WILL OF ITS
OWN AND WAS FIGHTING MINE.

MY BROTHERS BROUGHT ME
FOOD AND WATER AND TRIED
TO KEEP ME IN GOOD SPIRITS.

I WORKED IN SILENCE,
ALONE SAVE FOR SWANS
AND STINGING NETTLES.
I KNEW THE ROAD THAT
LAY AHEAD WOULD BE
DIFFICULT AND LONELY.



AND IT WAS, FOR A WHILE.

UNTIL ONE DAY, SOMEONE
BROKE THE SILENCE.



H-HELLO THERE!

I APOLOGIZE FOR
INTRUDING, I'D HEARD
THIS GRAVEYARD
WAS HAUNTED...

IT'S GOOD TO
SEE THAT'S NOT
THE CASE!

UNLESS YOU
HAPPEN TO BE A
GHOST, MISS?

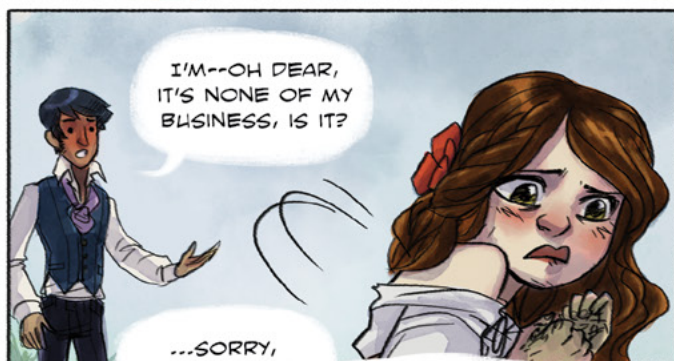


AH! I'M SORRY,
I'M JOKING! I DON'T
REALLY BELIEVE--

YOUR HANDS!
YOU'RE INJURED!
ARE YOU ALRIGHT? DO
YOU NEED HELP?



I'M--OH DEAR,
IT'S NONE OF MY
BUSINESS, IS IT?



...SORRY,
MAY I START
OVER?

I SOMETIMES WALK
OUT THIS WAY TO CLEAR
MY MIND. I DIDN'T MEAN
TO BOTHER YOU.

IT'S A PLEASURE
TO MEET YOU, MISS.
GHOST OR NOT!

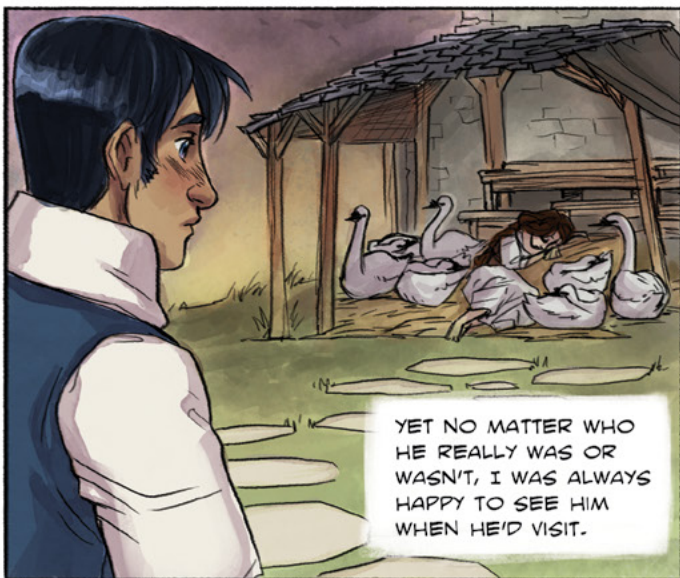
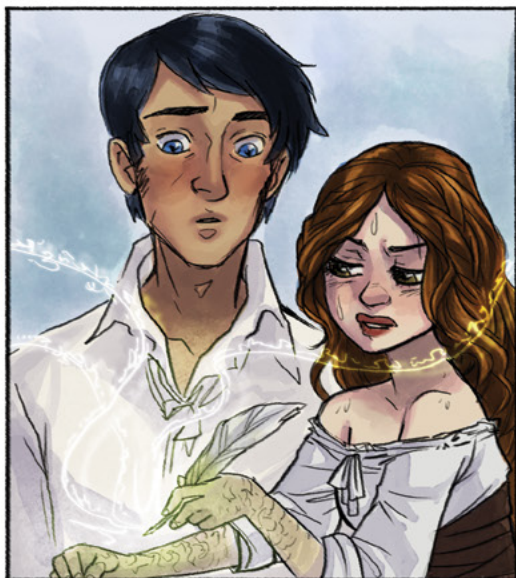




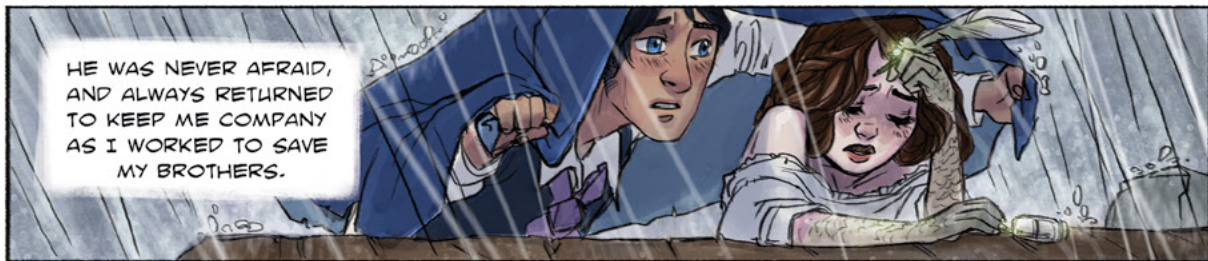
HE TOLD ME HIS NAME, BUT ONLY LATER DID HE REVEAL HE WAS TO BE CROWNED KING.

WHY DO THEY ONLY LIKE YOU?!
OW!!

I MUST ADMIT,
I DIDN'T BELIEVE HIM AT ALL.

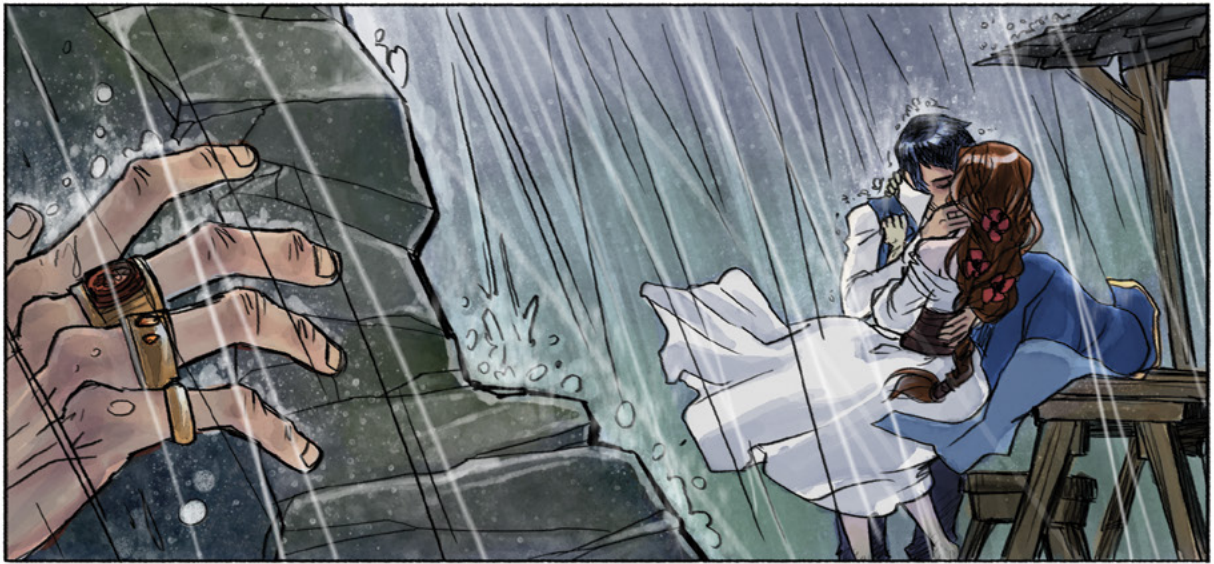


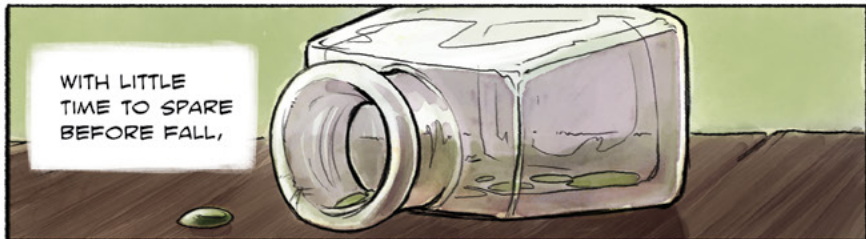
YET NO MATTER WHO HE REALLY WAS OR WASN'T, I WAS ALWAYS HAPPY TO SEE HIM WHEN HE'D VISIT.



HE WAS NEVER AFRAID,
AND ALWAYS RETURNED
TO KEEP ME COMPANY
AS I WORKED TO SAVE
MY BROTHERS.



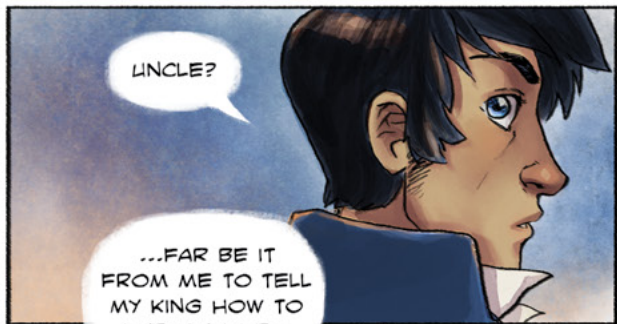




WITH LITTLE
TIME TO SPARE
BEFORE FALL,



I MANAGED TO
COMPLETE THE
FAIRY QUEEN'S
INSCRIPTION.

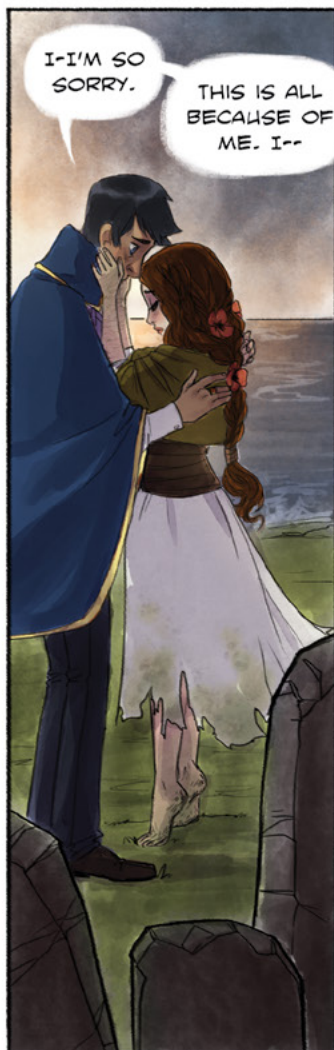
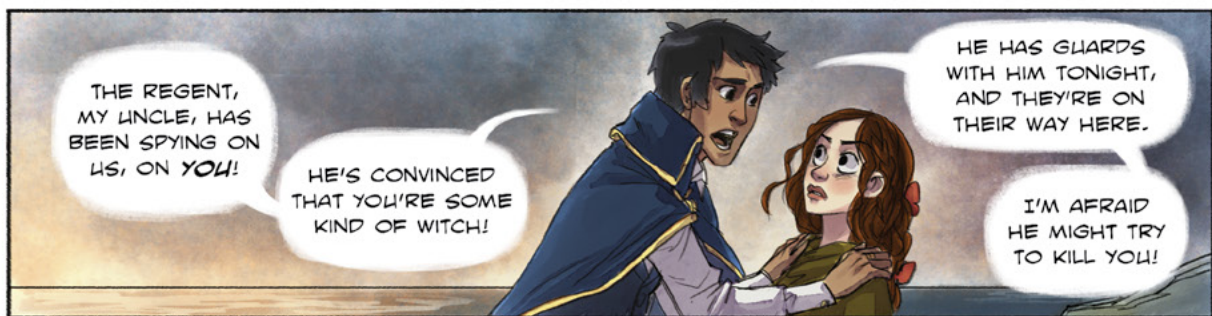


UNCLE?

...FAR BE IT
FROM ME TO TELL
MY KING HOW TO
LIVE HIS LIFE--



--BUT I'D LIKE TO
KNOW WHY HIS MAJESTY
SPENDS SO MUCH TIME IN
THAT GRAVEYARD WITH A
VILE SORCERESS.



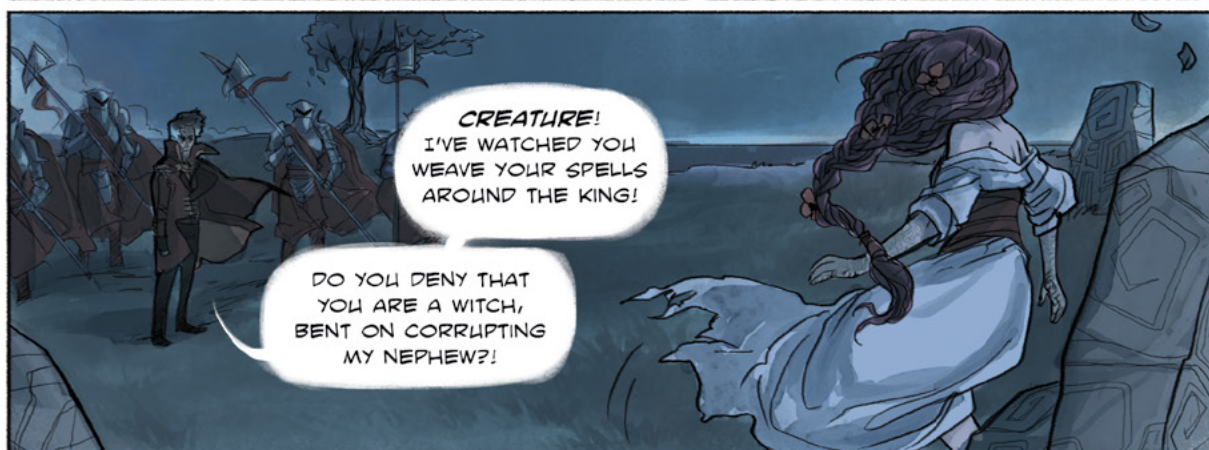


THE RING OF STONES WAS THERE, JUST AS THE FAIRY HAD TOLD ME IT WOULD BE.

BUT I HAD RUN OUT OF TIME.

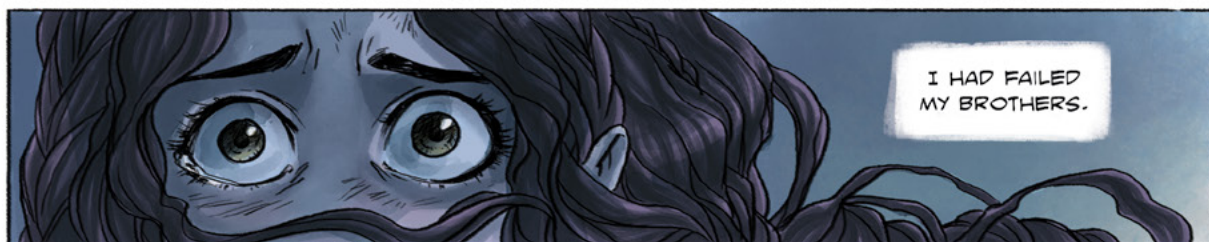


THE SKY WAS STILL DARK.



CREATURE!
I'VE WATCHED YOU WEAVE YOUR SPELLS AROUND THE KING!

DO YOU DENY THAT YOU ARE A WITCH, BENT ON CORRUPTING MY NEPHEW?!



I HAD FAILED MY BROTHERS.

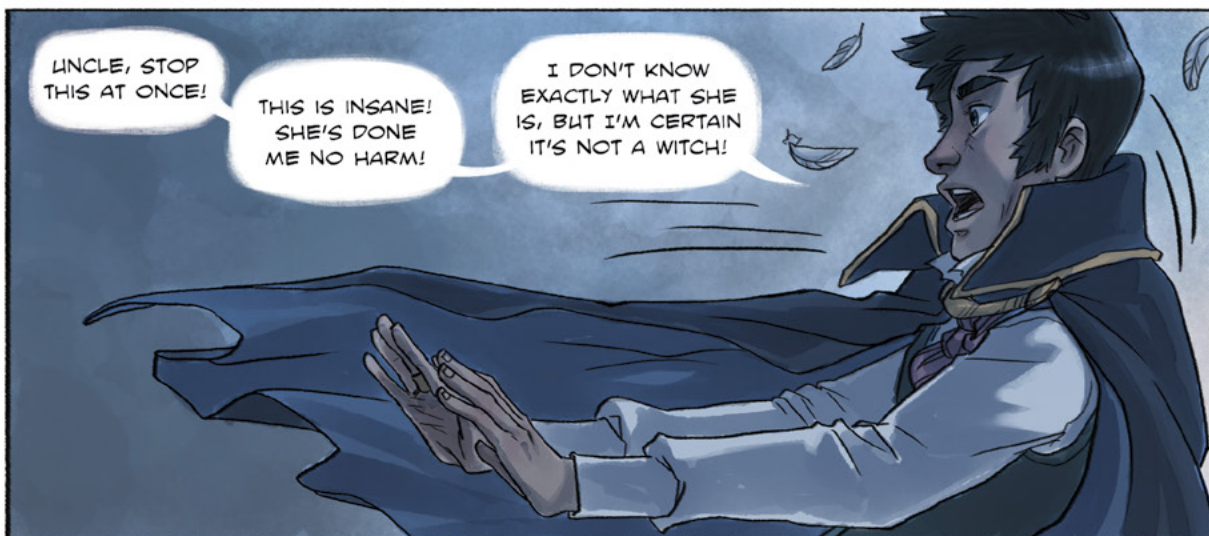


NOTHING TO
SAY IN YOUR OWN
DEFENSE!?

THIS IS YOUR
LAST CHANCE,
WITCH.



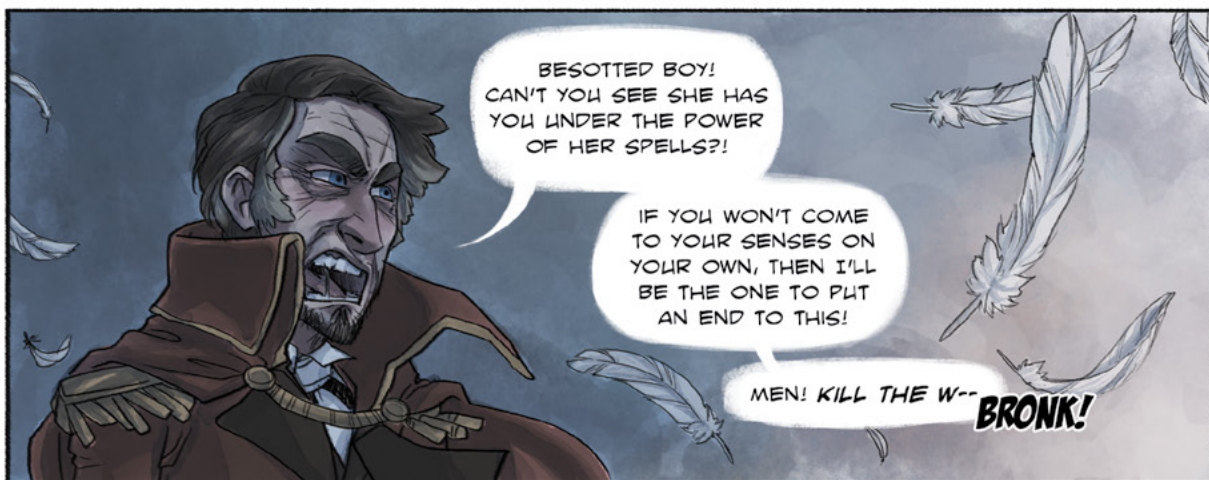
SO BE IT.
GUARDS--



UNCLE, STOP
THIS AT ONCE!

THIS IS INSANE!
SHE'S DONE
ME NO HARM!

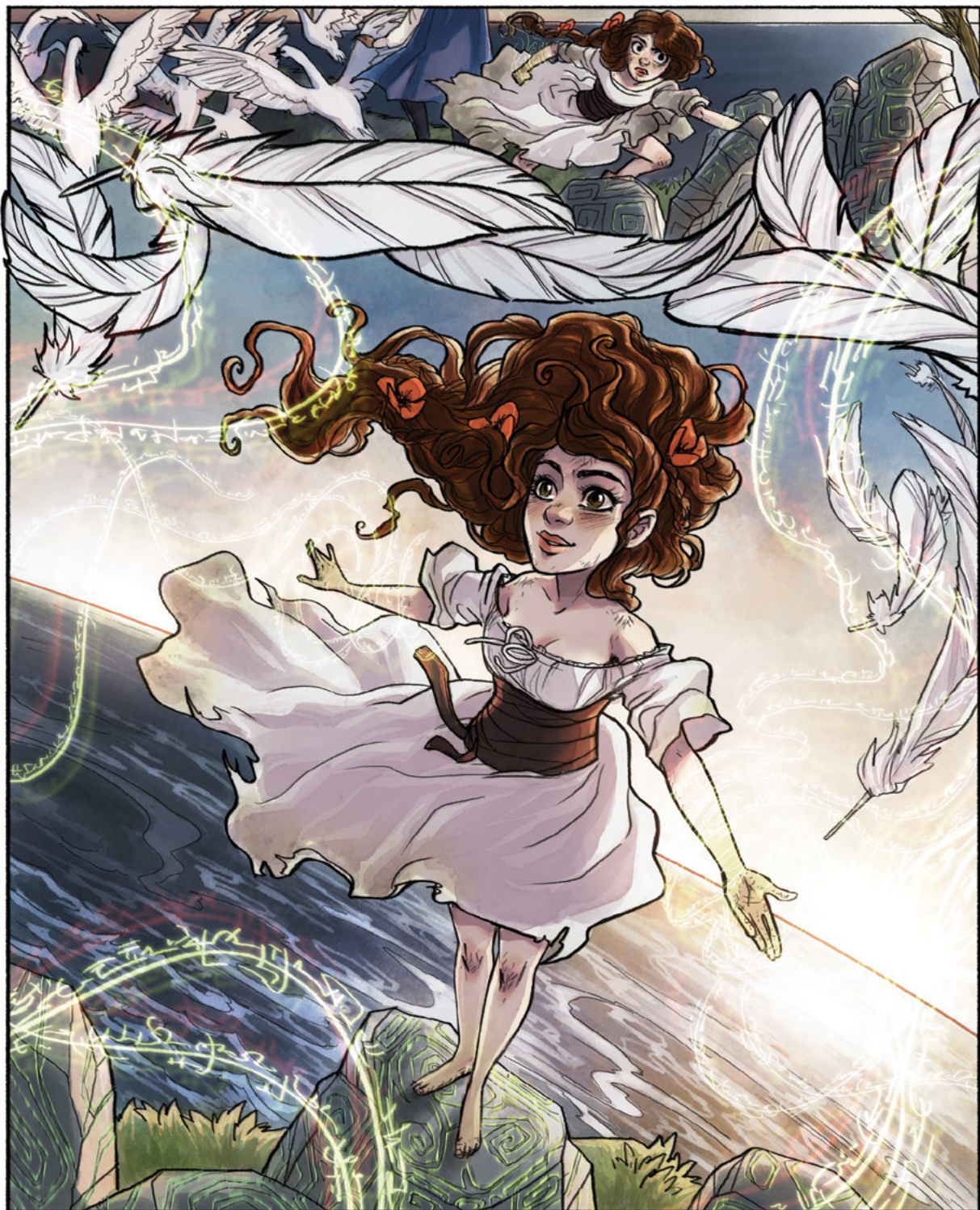
I DON'T KNOW
EXACTLY WHAT SHE
IS, BUT I'M CERTAIN
IT'S NOT A WITCH!



BESOTTED BOY!
CAN'T YOU SEE SHE HAS
YOU UNDER THE POWER
OF HER SPELLS?!

IF YOU WON'T COME
TO YOUR SENSES ON
YOUR OWN, THEN I'LL
BE THE ONE TO PUT
AN END TO THIS!

MEN! KILL THE W--
BRONK!

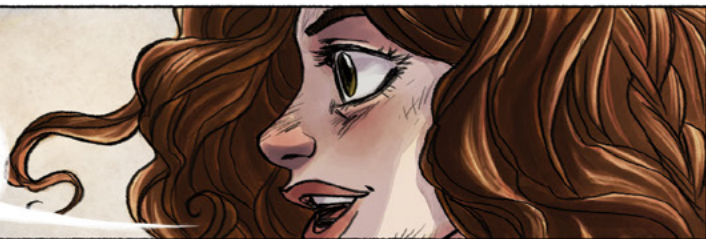


I AM NO
WITCH!!



MY NAME IS ELISE!

AND THESE ARE MY
BROTHERS, MY FAMILY!
YEARS AGO, THEY
WERE CURSED.



BUT THEY'RE
HUMAN AGAIN...
IT'S OVER!

LET OUR
SISTER GO
FREE!

SHE'S THE ONE
WHO SAVED US!

WE WON'T LET
YOU HARM HER.





PLEASE

by Ran & Cory Brown



Once upon a time, there were two sisters. They lived in a cold and wintry kingdom, whose people toiled to survive while their King feasted and was merry.



Rose Red was a bold huntress and a skilled trapper.



Snow White was an accomplished herbalist, wise and learned in many things.



Together, they lived well, in spite of the howling winter winds.





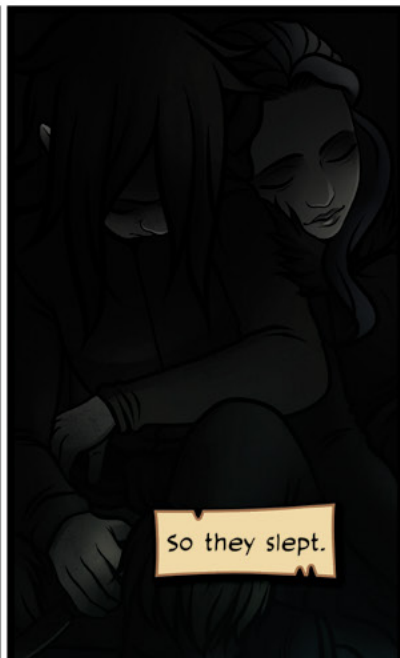
The beast settled by the hearth at once.



The sisters decided that one of them would always be awake to watch it, and to keep the fire stoked.



But the night was long, and their eyes were weary.



So they slept.



In the morning, the sisters found the bear curled up alongside them.




At first, they were afraid...




PLEASE


...but their mysterious visitor did not harm them.

A dark, atmospheric scene inside a rustic building. Two women are seated at a wooden table. On the table sits a large, golden-brown loaf of bread. The woman on the left has dark hair and is looking down at the bread. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is looking towards the left. The background is dark and indistinct.

They shared
their meal with
their guest.

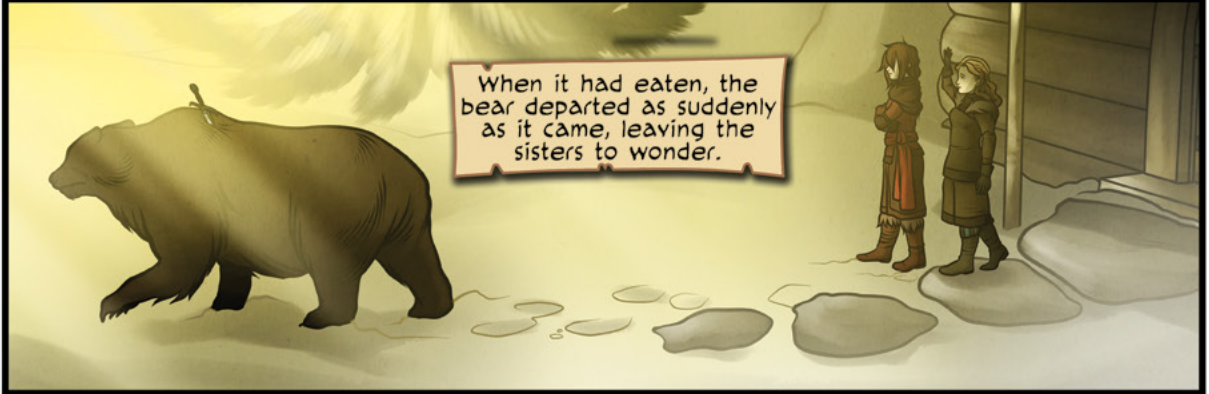
A close-up of a woman with blonde hair looking down at a large, ornate sword. The sword has a glowing blue hilt and a dark blade. The woman's expression is one of concern or sadness.

Snow White felt badly
for the wounded creature,
and made to remove the
sword from its side.

A large, dark bear is lying down. A woman with blonde hair is leaning over the bear, reaching out with her hand towards a sword that is embedded in the bear's forehead. The bear's eyes are glowing blue. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, yellowish light source in the background.

But the bear drew away,
growling, as she reached
for the blade.

So Snow
White let
it be.

A wide shot of a snowy landscape. A large brown bear is walking away from the viewer towards the left. In the background, two women are standing and watching the bear. The ground is covered in snow with some footprints. The sky is a pale yellow.

When it had eaten, the
bear departed as suddenly
as it came, leaving the
sisters to wonder.



For the next week, the bear returned every night, and the three of them slept by the hearth.



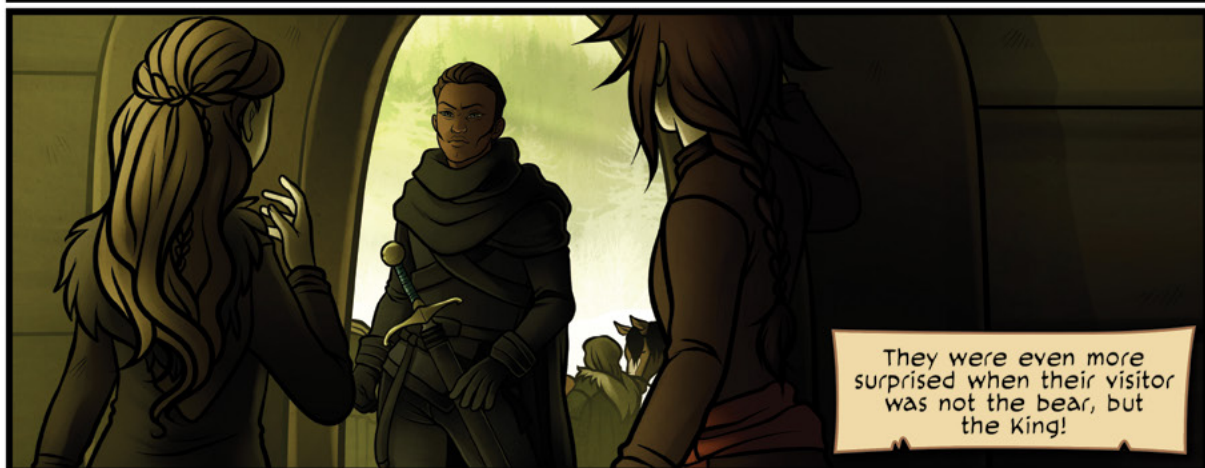
Every morning, it would share a meal with its gracious hostesses, then leave. They began to look forward to their strange friend's visits.

The girls went about their lives as usual, though curiosity tormented them.



**KNOCK
KNOCK**

They were surprised to hear a knock at their door during the daytime.



They were even more surprised when their visitor was not the bear, but the King!



The King told them that he was hunting a fearsome beast. He spoke of a great bear which, in its murderous hunger, had already slain his younger brother.



Though the King had lodged his finest sword in the monster's back, it had escaped him.

He asked the sisters if they had seen the creature, and promised a reward if they led him to his vengeance.



Snow White and Rose Red looked at one another.



Both knew that his claims could not be true. So they lied to the King.

The King thanked them for hearing his tale, and went on his way.



But the King recognized their deception. That night, he returned alone, and watched their cabin in secret.



The moment the bear had found its spot by the fire, the King burst triumphantly through the door, blade in hand.



They pleaded with the King to spare the bear. Such a gentle creature could not be his brother's killer.



But he only laughed, and mockingly congratulated them for their wisdom.



The arrogant King boasted of his cunning.

He had invited his brother to hunt, and struck him with a cursed sword meant to turn him into a beast.

Though the King had missed his mark, he could still blame the bear for his brother's death...

...and when he brought back its head, no one would suspect that he, himself, was the slayer of the only other heir to the throne.

His power would be absolute.

NO!
PLEASE

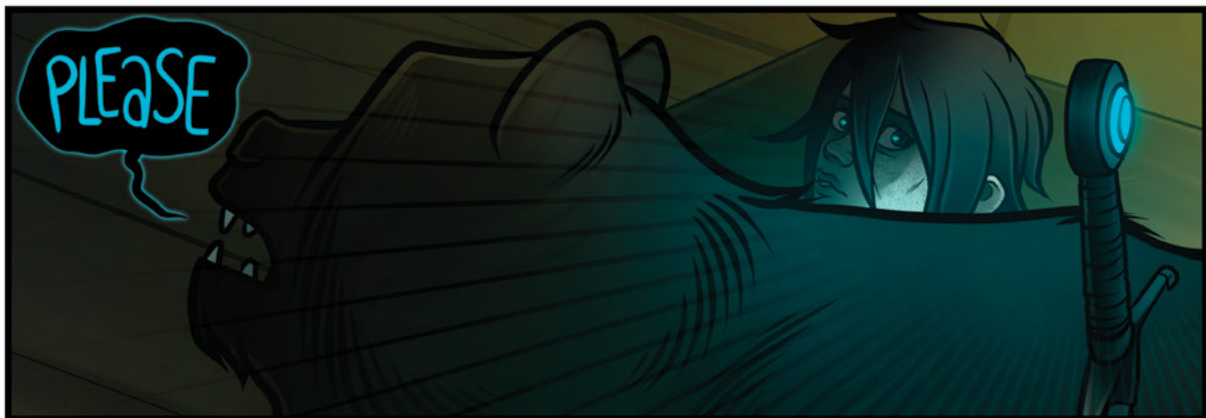


As the gloating King readied his blade, he promised to commission a memorial for the sisters... and mount it alongside the head of the bear that killed them.



Though unarmed, Rose Red damned the King for a coward, and readied herself to fight.

The bear drew near, and spoke one last request.



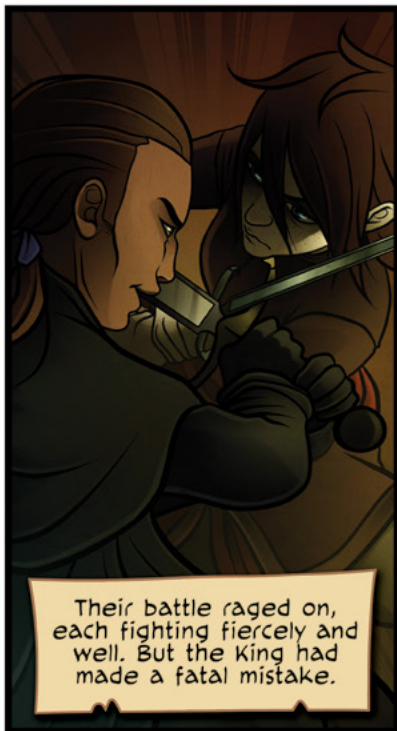
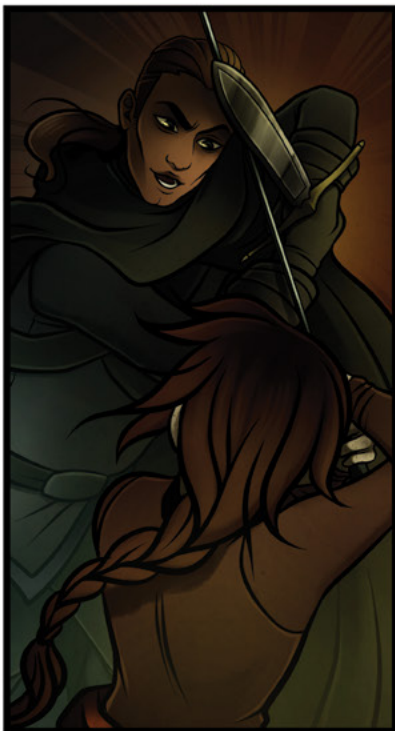
PLEASE



When Rose drew out the cursed blade, the bear collapsed in a pool of blood.



They fought to the death, commoner against King, loyal sister against treacherous brother.



Their battle raged on, each fighting fiercely and well. But the King had made a fatal mistake.



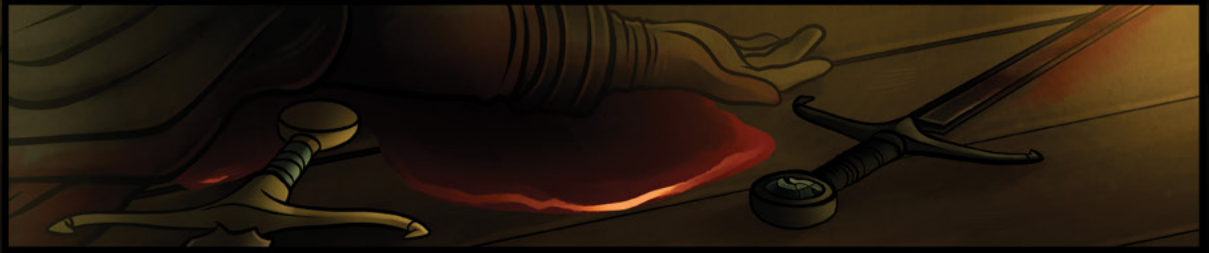
He had underestimated Rose Red.



And so, abruptly and violently, he died.



With the death of its master, the sword's curse was broken. The last heir to the throne, newly restored to his true form, lay bleeding to death on the floor.



The dying prince thanked the sisters for their kindness, and for avenging him before his passing.

Snow White interrupted his self-pity to gently remind him that she was an expert healer.



After resting the night under Snow White's watchful eye, the ragged prince gathered the strength to set out.



Uniting with his brother's hunting party, he shared his tale with them, and was brought safely home.



He was soon crowned King, and his reign was humble and kind.



And his people prospered.





For their part, Snow White and Rose Red lived on as they always had.



TAP
TAP

One cold night, there was a knock at their door.



To their surprise, an old friend stood at the threshold.



Please?

END.



All Furs

Story by Joanne Webster
Art by Emily Hann



The glow of the morning sun barely pierced the thick foliage of the dark forest. Many feared these woods, but I loved them. It was a bountiful hunting ground. By mid afternoon, my men and I had caught six large pheasants and one deer.

“When should we head back, your Highness?” asked Sir Richard, my father’s oldest knight, as I inspected my arrows.

“Let’s see if we can catch one more deer,” I replied playfully, much to Sir Richard’s annoyance. He’s rather determined to protect me, the sole heir to the throne. I do enjoy testing to see how many grey hairs I could give him every once in a while. “Then we’ll return-”

Something furry caught my eye as it passed behind a large oak. I spurred my horse forward, in a mild gallop. The creature was slow and oddly shaped. I prepared my bow. My first assumption was that it was a bear, as it was too small and too arched to be a deer. The animal turned towards me, revealing what looked like the flattened face of a donkey covered with other skins. The creature moved back, tripped and gave a loud “Eeep!” as it fell over a log.

I halted my horse, and lowered my bow. It would be impossible for me to miss my target at this range, but since in my experience, animals don’t cry out “Eeep!” when they fall, I was beginning to worry I had stumbled upon a fairy or troll of some sort. The many disturbing tales my father had told me as a child of magical beasts populating this forest echoed in my mind. “You! Identify yourself!” I said. “I am the Crown Princess Avery, so if you try-”

“Don’t shoot!” A dirt-covered hand appeared from behind the log. “I mean no harm!”

It was a girl’s voice. She stood up, revealing a rather astonishing appearance. The girl was covered head to toe in furs. It was nothing like a typical fur coat. It seemed to be sewn together from every kind of pelt imaginable. There was a bear skin covering her head and fox and wolf pelts dangling off her shoulders. Feathers and weasel husks hung off her waist as a long skirt with the hem stopping above her ankles. There were other furs mixed within the coat that I didn’t recognize, many with spots and stripes, quite possibly from animals not found in my country.

I could barely make out the girl’s face from beneath the bear pelt as it too was covered in dirt. She looked as if she was trying to vanish into the mixed layers of her coat.





“Who?” I stammered, baffled, “or what are you?”

“I-I am All Furs,” she said in a hoarse voice, as if she hadn’t spoken in months. “I am a wayward orphan with no home to call her own. Please have pity on me or a curse will fall upon you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “The Story of the Queen Mary and the Hunter.”

The girl lifted her head. “Pardon?”

“That line you just said is from the play, The Story of the Queen Mary and the Hunter,” I repeated, amused. This girl certainly was an odd one. That wasn’t even one of the better lines in the play. The girl tilted her head and then sighed. “Darn, I was hoping that would convince you to leave me alone.”

“You thought you could fool me with a line from a play?”

“It’s not exactly a well known play,” she responded and I couldn’t deny that. Not many people had heard of it outside Troila. I only happen to know it due to my love of the theater. “Give me another hour, and I can think of something more clever,” she insisted with great conviction.

I tried to suppress the laughter that wanted to escape my throat. “Is your name really All Furs?”

“Yes,” said the girl, “and I truly do live in these woods.”

I frowned as I glanced around. She sounded young, barely older than me. “It’s a rather dangerous place for a person to live in. There are bears, wild boars and I’ve heard trolls roam here too.”

All Furs gave a shrug as I heard the knights catching up to me. “There are far worse things than worrying if a bear or a troll will eat you.”

Before I could reply, I saw Sir Richard ready his bow at the girl, but I raised my arm to stop him. “It’s alright, she’s just a girl who steals lines from plays.”

“I wasn’t stealing! I was borrowing,” All Furs replied, sharply.

The knights stared in confusion at each other as I looked back to All Furs. “Why were you running from us?”

“Why?” All Furs said as she held up her arms showing off more of her coat. “Because you are hunters, and I am nothing but all furs. I was certain you would mistake me for an animal and stick an arrow in my back.”

“Fair point,” I said as I nudged my horse to step forward. I offered my hand to All Furs. “If you come with us to the palace, you wouldn’t have to worry about any of those things.”

All Furs stared at my hand and shyly poked at it like she expected it to dissolve. “You would let me live at the palace?”

“Yes,” I said. “Surely, the cook or someone can find work for you to do.”





“Princess,” Sir Richard said as he looked at All Furs suspiciously. “I’m not sure your mother would approve of this.”

“It’s hardly the first or last thing I would do that she hated,” I grumbled back as I kept my hand out to All Furs. “So, what do you say? Would you like to come with us, fair maiden?”

All Furs remained quiet, staring sternly at me, as if she was trying to read my mind. For a second, I thought she was going to run off and disappear in the dark forest, but she gingerly took my hand. “All right, if you insist.”

I pulled her up onto my horse, and I felt her small hands wrap around my waist. “Right, men! Let’s go home!” I called to them as my horse turned to gallop. “We’ll continue the hunt tomorrow. Who knows what we’ll find then.” I looked back to All Furs as we rode, hoping to catch a glance of her face, but she kept her face turned downward and hidden from me as we returned to the palace.

As fully expected, my mother was less than thrilled when I presented All Furs to her. However, she agreed with me that it wouldn’t be right to let a girl live in the forest all on her own. After much discussion and assurance to the horrified cook that All Furs would not leave hairs in her food, we assigned All Furs to the kitchen.

I had wanted to give her a bed in the servant quarters, but our servants refused and my mother agreed. Seemed none of the servants enjoyed the idea of sharing their quarters with a strange wild person from the woods “Heaven knows what she has crawling in there!” the maids complained.

“And we don’t want to wake up to find our beds crawling with fleas,” exclaimed the footmen. “We have our health to think of here! It’s hard enough to keep the place clean as is.”

Mother then suggested All Furs may be more content to sleep in the stables where she would have more privacy.

“Switching from living in isolation to being surrounded by a crowd does take time to adjust,” my mother argued. I was still strongly against it, but All Furs accepted it with no fuss. According to her, living in the stables was a luxury after surviving in the woods for so long.

“Besides,” All Furs said, “your mother is correct. It’s a little overwhelming. It would be nice to have a little solitude.” I was still reluctant, but there wasn’t much I could do if All Furs was fine with it, so I had no choice but to accept it.





I didn't see All Furs again until later that evening as the seamstress was finishing my fitting for my ballgown. She was carrying a pile of logs in her arms.

"I was asked to bring wood for your fire," All Furs said as she started to retreat. "But I can come back later."

"No, it's fine. We were done anyway," I replied as the seamstress collected my dress and gave a curtsy before exiting the room. I then went to sit in my chair to check that none of the heads of my arrows were loose as I watched All Furs go to the fireplace.

"Is it alright if I call you 'Furs'?" I asked.

"If you wish," All Furs said with a shrug. "My name doesn't mean much to me. May I ask what the gown was for?"

I sighed. "It's for the Winter Balls next month," I said, grumbling. "All three of them."

"You have three balls?" she asked surprised.

"Tradition," I said with a shrug. "It's supposedly a way for me to find the best person for me to marry. I don't mind the dancing," I leaned back into the chair, "but I'm not looking forward to my mother's nagging on which prince or princess I should be dancing with."

She gave me a half smile. "It is a nice dress at least, I haven't worn one in years."

"I could find you some new clothes if you like," I offered. "I know the cook will be overworking you for the ball, so you should get some reward for that."

All Furs chuckled and shook her head, causing the fox and wolf tails to quiver on her shoulders. "No, it's fine, this coat is all I need."

"Have you always lived in the woods?" I couldn't believe she had. Her manner of speaking combined with her knowledge of the arts implied that Furs must have been in a city at some point. It wasn't as if plays were often performed in the middle of a woods by rabbits.

Furs remained quiet as she dumped more logs into the fireplace. I thought she hadn't heard me, but then she softly said, "I used to live in the country of Trolia, but not anymore."

"Trolia?" I replied surprised. I had thought she wasn't a local, but I never would have guessed she'd come from a country far over the mountain range. "I did hear a lot of people fled Trolia during the last few years of King Louis's reign, but from there to here? That's a long trip."

Furs paused as she turned to look at me. "King Louis reigns no more?"





I gave a nod as I placed my arrows with the others. “His nephew is king now. Good thing too. I heard King Louis went quite insane when his wife passed away. He almost brought the kingdom to ruin with his irrational wars and ludicrous declarations. Rumor has it, he was planning to marry his own daughter.” She winced at those words. Clearly, she had experienced first hand the problems of the kingdom. I pretended to ignore it, not wishing to embarrass her with questions. If Furs had to flee Trolia and forced to live in a forest to feel safe, she probably wasn’t eager to discuss it. “I just hope that the nephew will be more stable, and the country can fully recover and start anew with their old king dead.”

Furs then jumped to her feet, shaking. “Dead?”

I looked at her curiously. “You haven’t heard?” It was all anyone had talked about when it happened, but who knew how long Furs had been living in the woods by herself. “King Louis passed away two years ago.” They had claimed it was sickness, although many believed that someone had slipped a little something extra into the King’s supper the night before he passed.

Furs shuddered, wrapping her tattered fur coat tighter around herself. “He’s dead. He’s truly dead,” she muttered.

“Are you okay?” I asked, as I reached out to touch her shoulder.

Furs took a breath and held her head high. “Yes, I’m fine.” She gave a swift bow. “Do you need anything else of me tonight?”

I pressed my lips together, wishing to find another topic to so I could keep talking with her, but found myself dismissing her. “No, thank you, Furs,” I said and gestured to the door. “Why don’t you go rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She gave a nod before creeping out of the room, meekly as a mouse. I sat and stared into the fire as my brain pondered what Furs had said.

The next month flew by. Both my royal parents were running around like headless chickens as the date of the first ball approached. I tried to see Furs when I could, but my chances were limited thanks to the added sword, manner and dance lessons my mother insisted to cram into my schedule. It was only when Furs would come into my room each night to tend to the fire that I had a few blissful moments with her. We talked of various topics; recipes, novels, castle life, sewing, what berries to eat and not eat while in the woods if you didn’t wish to be poisoned. Truthfully, I was becoming quite fond of her, and I grew more curious about where my furry friend originally come from. Each time I tried to approach the subject, Furs would hastily change it. It was clear





she didn't wish to discuss it. Eventually, I decided to let Furs keep her secrets, at least for now.

The night of the Winter Ball then came. My parents debated which outfit I should be wearing for the first ball; the gown or the military tunic. I had hoped I could slip Furs out of the kitchen so she could steal a glimpse of the party, but I was unable to escape the unending line of guests I had to greet.

As the line was finally shorter, the orchestra began the first notes of the ball's opening dance, a lively tune meant to energize the crowd. As the guests flocked towards me, all eager to be my first dance partner, I knew it was impossible for me to leave without being impolite.

I danced with five princes and four princesses, and they were pleasant enough, but their attempts at small talk made me uncomfortable. One can only discuss the current weather a certain number of times and I wasn't at all interested in the Prince of Romana's fascination with agricultural history and ancient pottery. After the fifth princess and I ended our dance, I went to get a much-needed drink. My mother glided towards me, smiling. "There are many wonderful suitors for you to choose from."

"Yes, mother. I know," I replied dryly.

"Don't slouch, dear. A future ruler needs good posture."

I sighed, half expecting her to start fixing my hair.

The familiar voice of the sentry at the door resonated as he, as always, announced a new guest. But this time, his voice cracked unexpectedly. The crowd turned to see who had shocked him so, as the sentry was rarely astonished. A few guests gasped, taken aback by the vision that stepped through the doorway. "Who is that girl?" my mother asked, stunned. "I've never seen her before."

The girl spotted me and made a beeline towards me, weaving through the flock of princesses assembled before me. The best word to describe her would have been "glowing". She had long flowing golden hair that mixed with the design of her gown, made of a material that shone as brightly as the sun itself. She was dazzling to say the least.

My mother stepped aside with a sly smile as the girl approached and bowed. I noticed then her eyes were brown, gentle and kind, like those of a deer. I could have sworn I had seen those same eyes before. She had tiny freckles decorating





her nose and cheeks.

“May I have this dance, Princess Avery?” she asked.

I nearly choked on my drink as I gulped it down. “Um...er...yes...what’s your name?”

She smiled sweetly at me as she offered her hand. “You may call me Samantha, or Sam for short.”

We drifted to the dance floor. She twirled and glided effortlessly, as if she was weightless, like sunlight. She barely casted a shadow, she seemed like a dream.

“Y-you are a good dancer,” I complimented, overwhelmed.

“As are you,” Sam commented, amused by my enthusiasm.

Sam and I danced together for the next hour. I found myself talking to her in a way I had never spoken with anyone else before... Except maybe Furs. Oddly enough, faced with such a vision, I kept thinking back to my friend in the kitchens. The orchestra took a short break, allowing the guests to mingle. I turned away for a moment, to answer the Prince of Romana’s insistent questions, only to find her gone.

No one seemed to know where Sam had come from or when she had come. She had appeared and vanished through the door, as if it was enchanted. The ball ended soon after her departure. I tried my best to be a good host, but my mind kept drifting back to Sam. All I could do was hope she would return for the next ball.





Both my parents hounded me with questions about the mysterious princess. They were as smitten as I was. Sam was the talk of the castle for the next week. Everyone was sharing tales about the Sunlight Princess.

A few days before the second ball, I sighed wistfully as I prepared for bed when I heard a knock at the door.

“Princess Avery,” the cook called. “I have some bread soup for you.”

I had been so busy dancing and daydreaming I hadn’t been able to eat much. “Bring it in.”

The cook came in and set the tray on the table as I finished brushing my hair. The cook watched me, strangely anxious. She usually stayed to ensure the meal tasted fine, but so far, she had never disappointed me. Why was she so nervous?

I dipped my spoon in and took a mouthful. The taste surprised me. The cook’s bread soup wasn’t bad, but I had always found it too salty. This bread soup, however, was perfect. I raised an eyebrow at the cook who coughed uncomfortably as I continued to eat my meal. I enjoyed every delicious mouthful until I got to the last few spoonfuls. It was then that I saw something glitter at the bottom of the bowl and fished it out with my spoon.

It was a solid gold ring. I knew the cook didn’t own such fine jewellery, and even if she did, she wasn’t so careless as to leave it in a soup.

“Who made this?” I asked, as I slipped the gold ring into my pocket without the cook seeing. “I know it wasn’t you.”

“It does taste bad doesn’t it? I knew it!” The cook exclaimed as if she had been expecting this to happen. “I didn’t make it, It was All Furs.”

“Furs?” I said, astonished. I didn’t know she could cook this well. I paused, thinking back on the past weeks. I barely spoke to her, consumed by my curiosity of Sam. I spent weeks being selfish while my friend must have been practicing her culinary skills to surprise me. I felt awful.

“Forgive me, your Highness but I was busy helping the sous-chef, and All Furs offered to make the soup for me. She insisted, but if I had known it would turn out this horrible-”

“It’s fine,” I said as I raised my hand to hush her rambling. “Please send her up.”

The cook looked confused, but relieved. She took my tray and left. I didn’t have to wait long for Furs to appear.

“What may I do for your Highness?” she asked.

I held up the gold ring to her. “I found this in the soup, is it yours?”

Furs shook her head. “No, it is not.”





I frowned as I fiddled with the ring between my thumb and forefinger. “Do you know how it got there?”

She shrugged. “I do not, but perhaps someone slipped it in when I wasn’t looking.”

I could not see that being likely. Who would willingly put treasure in a soup? “Is that all, Princess Avery?” Furs asked dryly as she tucked her hands into the sleeves of her coat.

“It is, thank you,” I replied, a bit upset my friend seemed unwilling to speak to me. I watched her leave as I continued to fiddle with the gold ring. I wondered if it would fit perfectly on Furs’s slim fingers.

The next ball came and I felt excited. I was dying to see Sam again, but as the night grew shorter, I worried she would not appear. Close to midnight, the sentry announced her. This time, his voice was booming and enchanted. The guests giggled and whispered, thrilled to see the mysterious princess once more.

She wore a different dress, this one was a dark and deep blue, spotted with specks of silver that shimmered and converged in a moon symbol that seemed to be waning as she moved. A silver pin held her hair up, the color of which seemed clouded, to match the nighttime color of the gown.

I practically ran towards her, asking her for a dance when she had barely made it through the doorway. She smiled at me adorably, mouthing, “Yes”. Her freckles had been decorated with small glitters that made her skin look like it was alight with constellations.

Once again, I felt at ease talking to Sam. I learned she loved cooking, but she also enjoyed needlework and had been curious to learn about archery.

“I could teach you,” I offered as we twirled along to the music. “I’m quite a good shot.”

“Oh, I know,” she said with a sly smile. “You’re handy to have in a hunt.”

I was curious to ask just how she could know that when the music stopped. Again, all it took was a short distraction and she was gone.

I was disappointed, but I wasn’t as discouraged as after the previous ball since I had a better sense that I would see her again. The third ball still remained. And this time, I’d keep hold of her hand.

The next night, as every night, the cook brought me bread soup, and as I got to the last spoonful, I found a tiny golden spinning wheel. The cook stared aghast as I caught the trinket in my spoon. She confirmed it was Furs who had made the soup and fetched her for me. Furs stepped in and I held up the spinning





wheel for her to see.

“Is this yours?” I asked.

“No,” she replied with a smile. “That does not look like something I would own.”

I drummed my fingers against my knee as I tried to decipher her expression. “Why do you think,” I inquired, “that these little trinkets only seem to appear after you deliver me my soup?”

“I do not know, your Highness,” All Furs replied.

“These aren’t jewels anyone would have,” I said as I toyed with the spinning wheel in my hand. “I’ve heard these are common Christening gifts given to royal children. So, why would they be appearing in my soup?”

“I do not know,” Furs said. “Perhaps your gifts are late and a fairy saw to correct it.”

I stared at her, unconvinced. “Furs, do you like dancing?”

She winced slightly, but she kept her rigid smile. “I can’t say I’ve had much practice in the woods, so I doubt I would be a good dance partner.” She ducked her face in farther under her fur hood. “Is that all, Princess Avery?”

“Yes, thank you,” I muttered and watched her leave. I had a theory on Furs’s identity, but I needed solid proof. The next morning, I summoned to my chambers the conductor of the orchestra. I had a secret request for him and his musicians.

The next ball came, I fidgeted with the gold ring in my pocket and patted it for luck when Sam appeared.

The dress she was wearing was my favourite among the three. It reminded me of the dim woods where I had found Furs. It was a dark pine green, and was layered with lace as delicate as rose petals and as detailed as leaves. The hem seemed to move like leaves carried by the wind. Her hair looked almost brown against the woodland gown and was held up by twigs and vines fashioned into a tiara. More than ever, her kind eyes reminded me of a doe.

I walked towards her, confident as ever, and invited her to dance. Our routine repeated and we chatted as usual. Sam seemed to think nothing was amiss as we discussed whether you could shoot an apple off a person’s head, when suddenly she frowned. I knew she had expected the music to end, but the musicians continued to play, just as I had asked them to. Another group of musicians was ready to step in whenever some of the players needed a break. Sam was getting anxious. She stumbled and her fingers on my shoulder grew tense.

Sam wanted to flee, but I kept a hold on her arm. “Come,” I said with a





smile. "I want you to meet my parents."

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. "No, I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"But it's only polite," I locked eyes with her and slipped the golden ring onto her finger.

"No, I am so sorry, Avery," she pleaded, "but I can't." She yanked her arm free, and I let her go. I resisted chasing after her as she fled. The ball ended soon afterward, and I was still in my dress when the cook came to bring me my soup.

"Oh, sorry, your Highness," the cook said as she was about to retreat. "I'll wait until you're--"

"No, bring it here," I instructed as I removed my gloves, "and tell All Furs to come up, please."

I knew the cook had to be wondering why I was being more hasty than usual, but I couldn't waste time. I needed to catch her in the act. As I waited, I dug my fingers into the soup and sure enough, I found a golden spindle at the bottom.

I was holding it up as Furs entered. She sounded out of breath, but still tried to greet me with a smile. "Is there something wrong?" she asked.

I was silent as my eyes stared at the bottom of Furs's coat. Beneath the pelts there was... leaves. "Do you have a dress on?" I asked.

Furs glanced down, and her eyes widened in alarm. "Oh, no. It's um..." She stammered and tried to conceal the fabric with her coat. However, as she moved, the glint of the gold ring caught my eye. I reached out and seized her hand.

I gently ran my fingers over the ring and looked to Furs. "I had placed this on Sam right before she left the ball." I smirked at her. "Care to explain why it is on your finger?"

Furs seemed to be at a loss for words. She then sighed, defeated, as she used her free hand to lower her hood to reveal the woodland's dress' tiara. Her face was covered in soot and dirt, but it was the same face I had been dancing with for the last three nights.

"Mysterious princess showing up and the appearance of golden treasures in my soup? It doesn't take much thought to see a connection between the two."

Sam sighed, sounding exhausted as she took a seat in a chair. "I figured you might guess, but I had hoped I could get away with a third night at least."

I pulled up a second chair and leaned forward. "Who are you exactly?"

She shut her eyes like she was recalling a bad dream. "I am - or was - Princess Samantha of Trolia."





I imagined Sam expected me to look shocked, but I wasn't. "I had thought so." I swallowed, unsure if I was allowed to ask this or not. "Is it true your father—"

"Wanted to marry me because I was looked like my dead mother? Yes." She slumped in the chair and looked up at the ceiling. "The councillors had tried to persuade him to see reason, but he refused." She fingered the fur coat. "So, I told him that I would only marry him if he could find me a dress made from sunlight, a dress woven from the night sky, a dress sewn from the forest trees and a coat assembling the furs from every animal we had in the kingdom."

Troila was famous for its trade in cloth making. It was said they made some of the finest silks in the world. It seemed like a challenge worthy enough to both stall and appease the king. That would also explain the theme of the trinkets left in the soup. They were all related to sewing and cloth making. The spindle and wheel were obvious. And silk merchants knew that pulling a yard of silk through the ring was the best way to deduce if the silk was real or fake. Fake silk bunched against the metal while real silk glided through. These golden trinkets would be fitting for a princess of Troila.

Sam rubbed her tired eyes. "I had thought he would never be able to complete the gowns, or at least he would grow tired of me before he completed my request."

"But he didn't," I finished. "And he made the dresses and coat."

"Within three months, with the help of a zealous fairy godmother." Sam replied as she fiddled with her hair. "I realized I had to run away to escape him." She gave a bitter laugh. "The irony is that he had barely looked at me when I was a child, and the first time I got actual attention from him was when I didn't want it."

I reached out and squeezed her hand. "So, you've been living in the forest since you ran away? But King Louis has been dead for two years now," I asked. "Why do you still feel the need to hide? No one at my court would have cared."

Samantha gave a shrug as she wrapped her arms around herself. "Force of habit, I suppose? And even if my father is gone now, I can't go back to Troila. There are too many bad memories there. And too many people who fear my return."

"All right," I replied as I fixed my skirt. "But, why did you come to the ball then?" I held up the golden trinkets. "And why put these in my soup?"

"The trinkets were my way of thanking you."

"Thanking me?" I asked surprised.





“There aren’t many people that would give shelter to a wayward girl living in the woods,” she bit her lower lip, “and you’ve become very precious to me.” She gazed up at me with a sad smile. “Truth be told, Avery, you’re the first person I felt I could trust since I left home. I dressed as a princess because ... I wanted to stay here but I also wanted to be able to talk to you on the same level.”

I went quiet as my hands tightened into fists. “We were already talking on the same level. You were my friend as Furs. The first time I saw you as Sam... All I could think about was my friend in the kitchens.”

Sam pouted “And then you forgot me until I dangled a mystery under your nose.”

I laughed nervously “Well... to be fair, the mystery of the magical princess was equally fascinating.”

We both giggled, sitting around the table, as the bread soup grew cold.

Samantha was clever, beautiful and kind. Sam was not someone to be pitied, she was someone to admire. Someone I should feel proud to call my Queen.

“Sam,” I said as I took her hands gently. “Will you marry me?”

She looked up surprised. “You mean...you love me?”

“Of course I do,” I said, and frowned. “You don’t love me?”

“No, no, I do,” she said, “but I didn’t think you felt that way about me.” She rubbed her neck and blushed. “That’s why I wanted to keep my identity secret, so I wouldn’t embarrass myself since I assumed you didn’t.”

“Well, I do, so I’ll ask again,” I repeated. “Will you marry me?”

I thought she would be hesitant, but she gently brushed my dark hair out of my eyes and kissed my cheek.

“Gladly.”

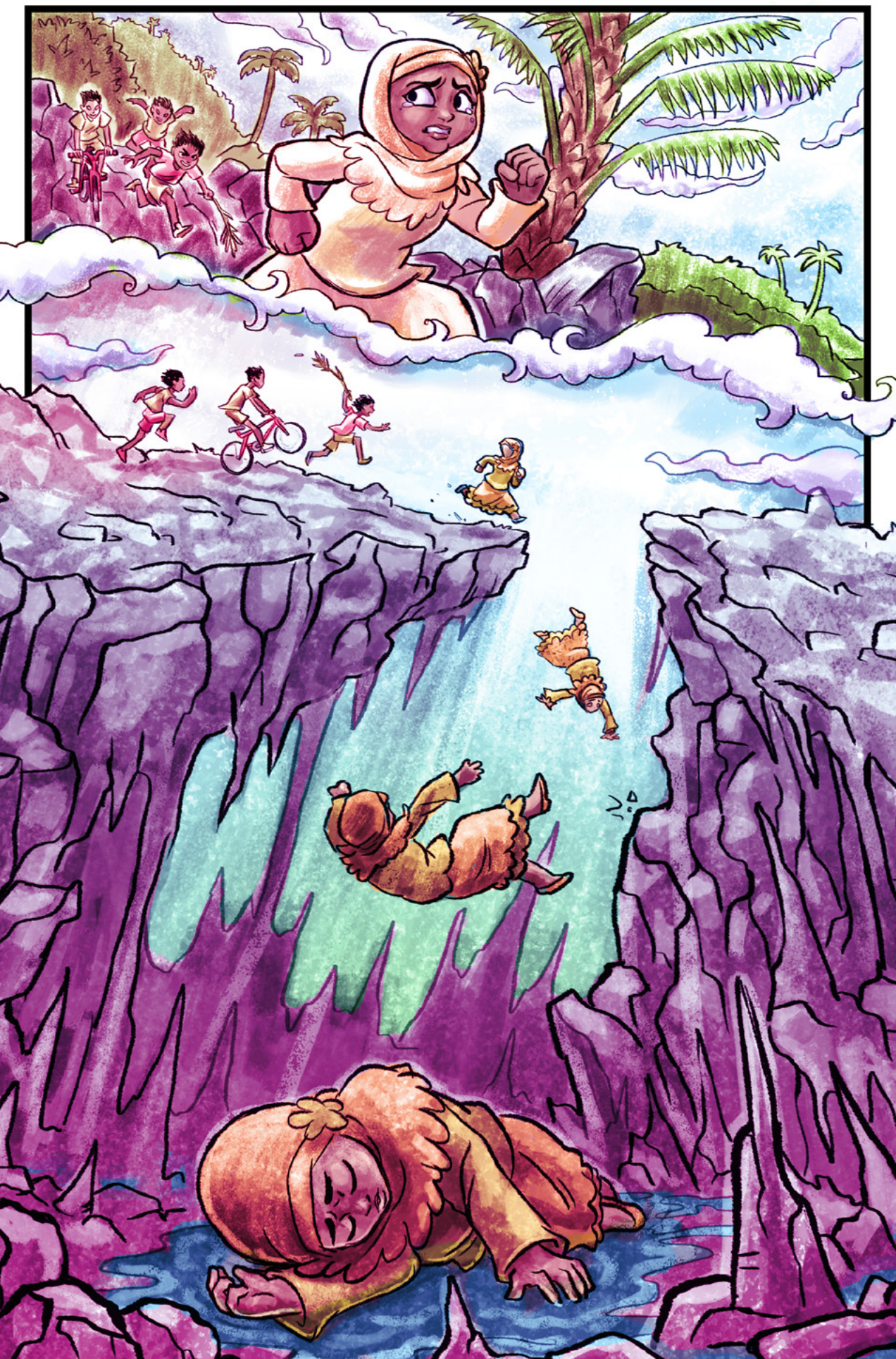
I smiled as I engulfed her into a hug. We were married that spring, and both of my parents were overjoyed. Although, it did take a few tries to get my mother to fully understand that All Furs and Sam were one and the same. We made plans to spend our honeymoon in the woods so I could properly teach my Queen how to use a bow and an arrow. In return, she would teach me how to sew. Maybe at the next ball, I’ll have a dress made of wind and clouds.

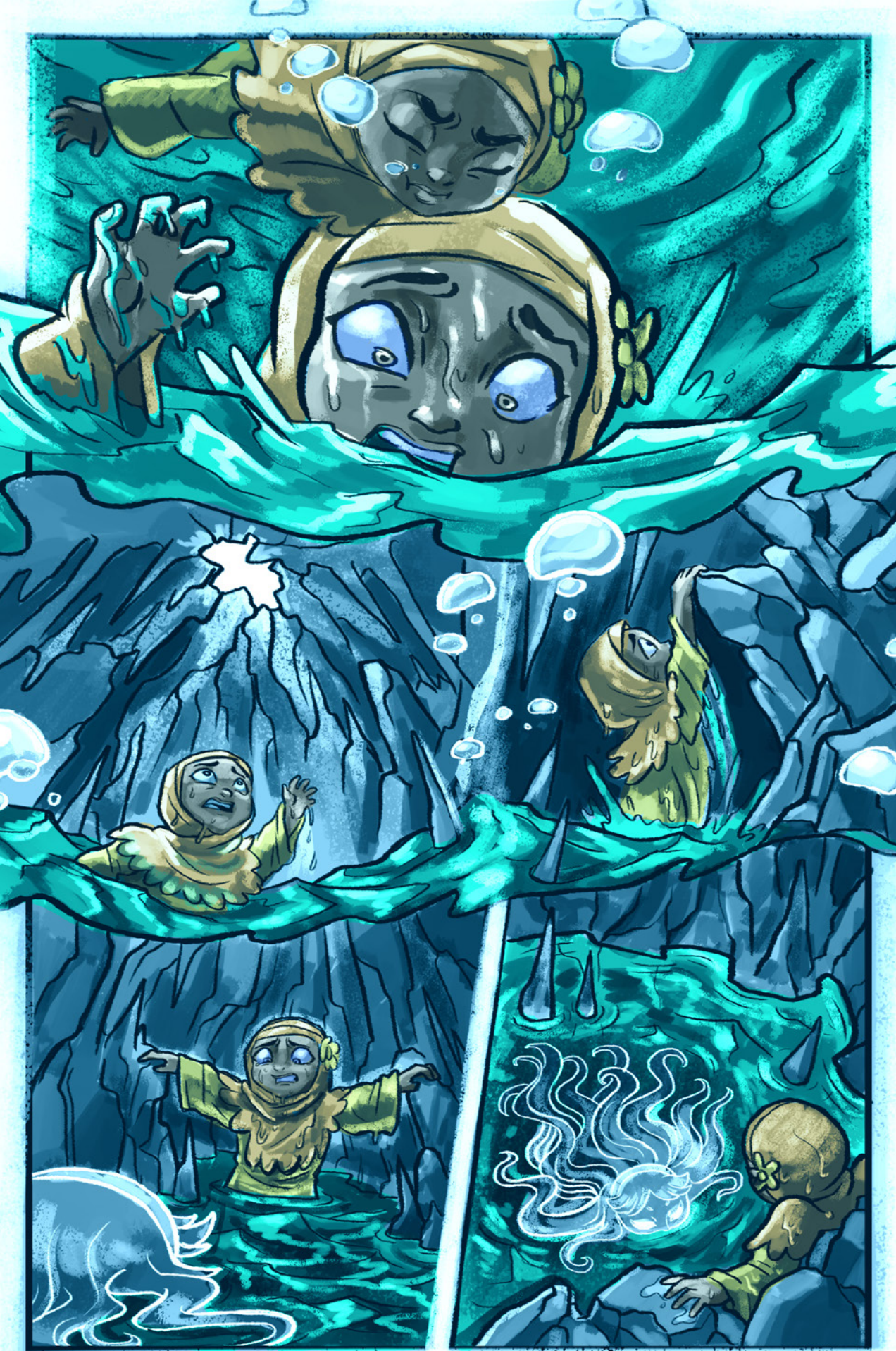


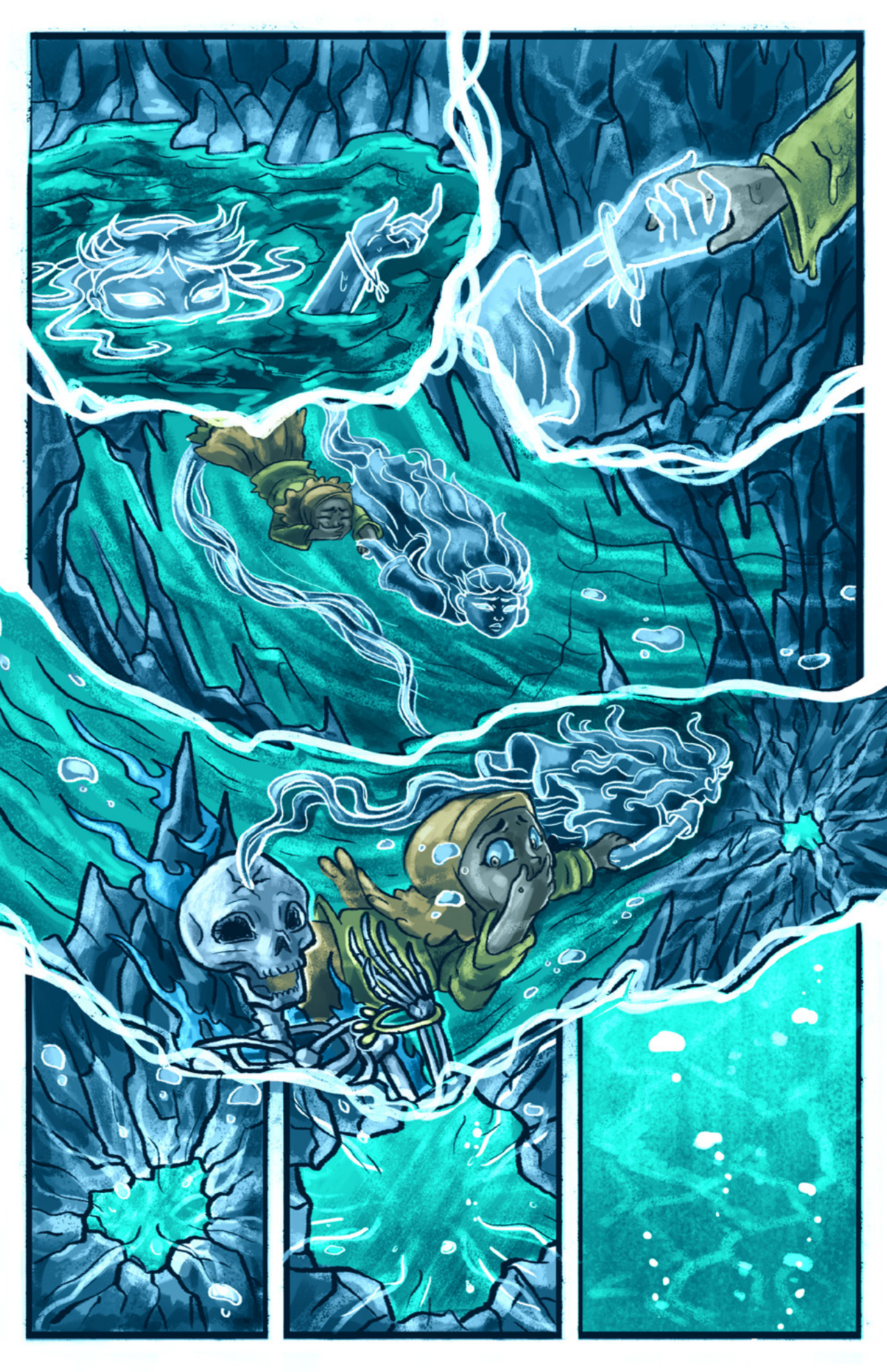
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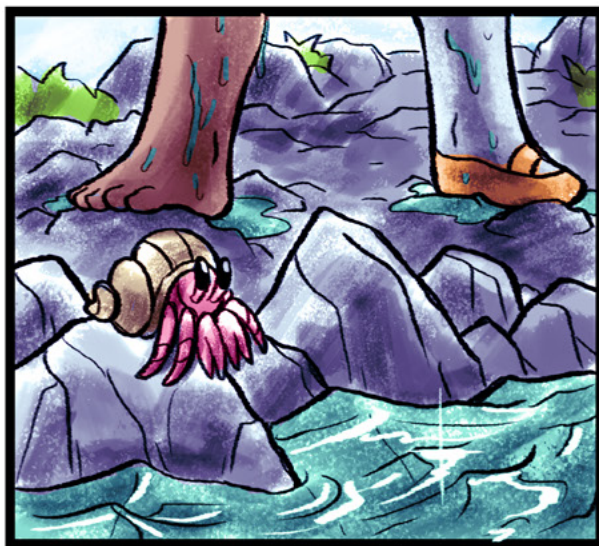
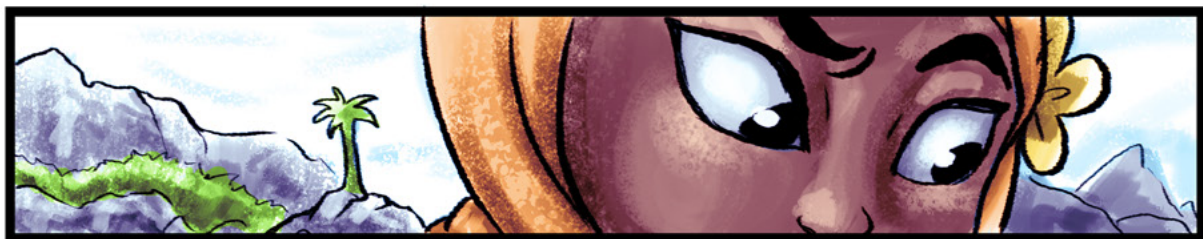
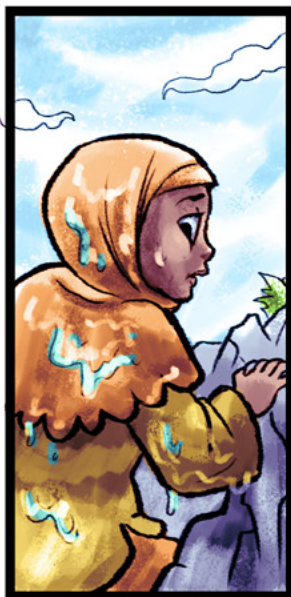


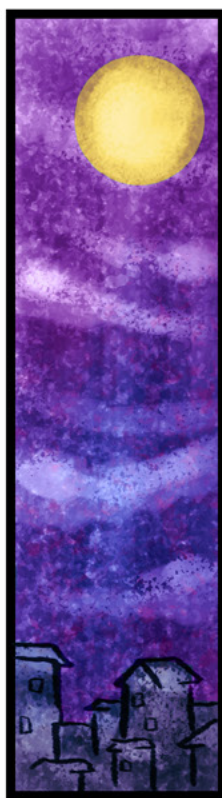
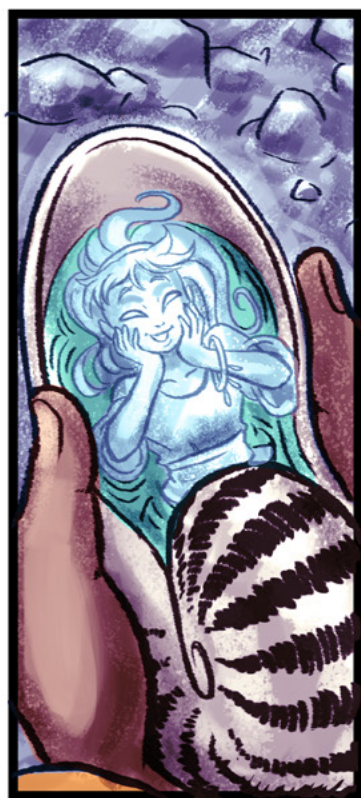
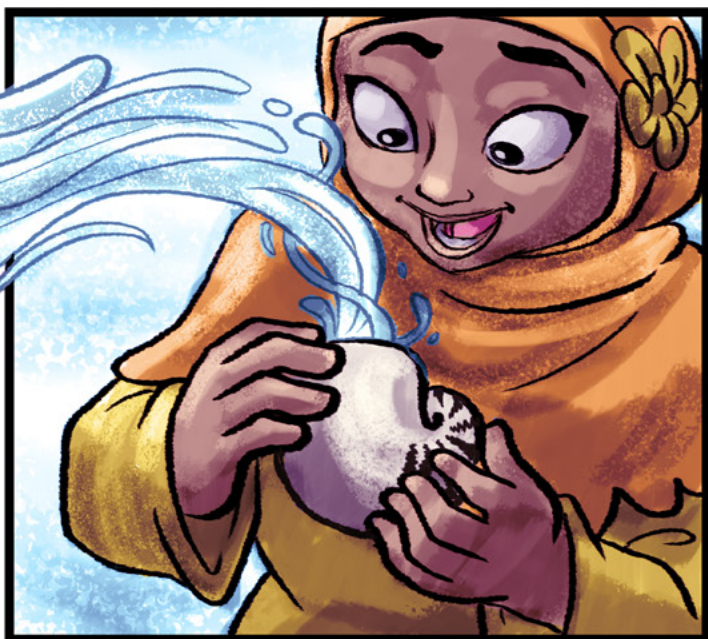
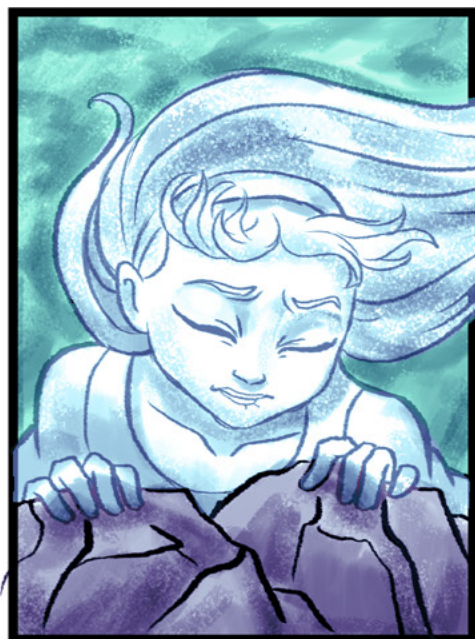
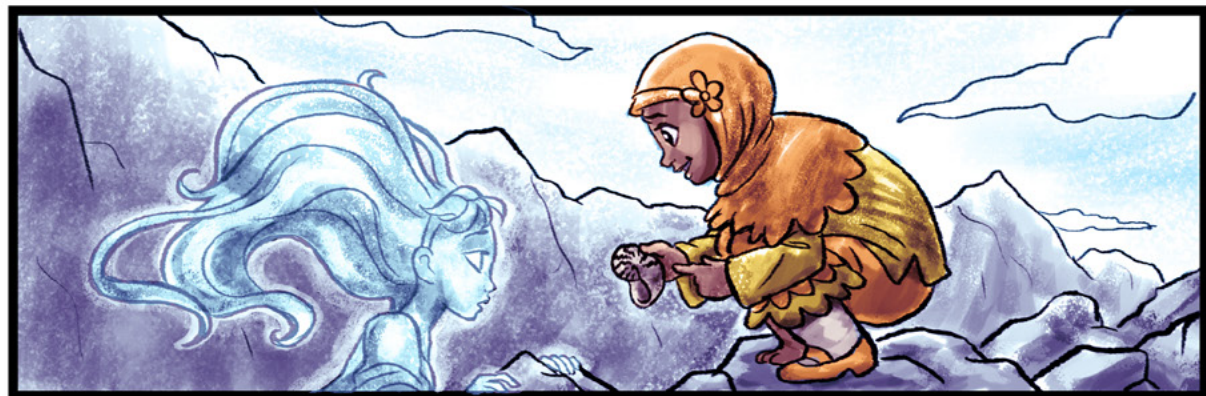
written by Ash Barnes
drawn by Elena "Yamino" Barbarich

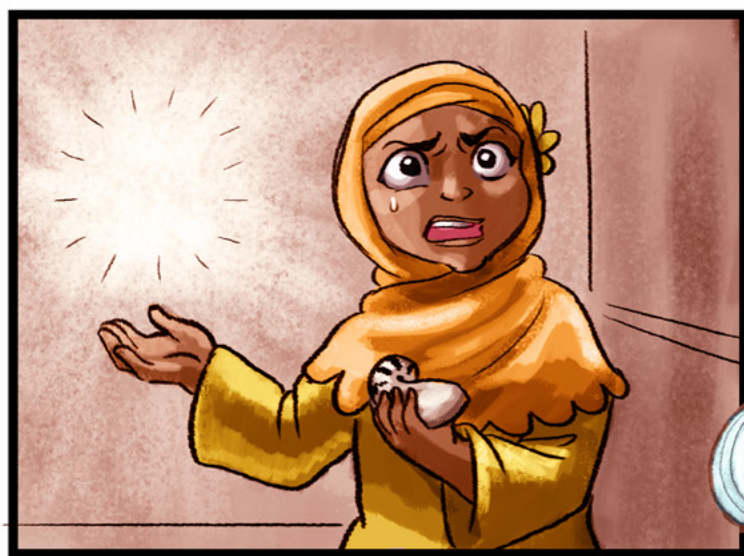
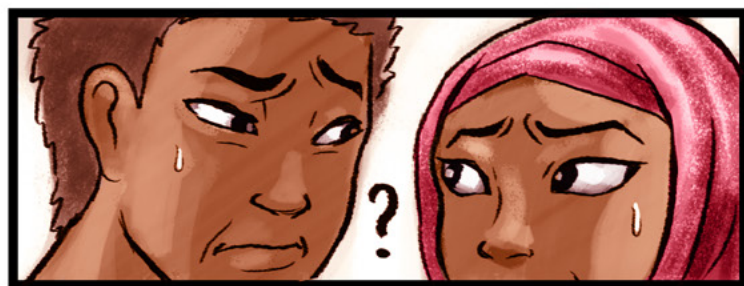
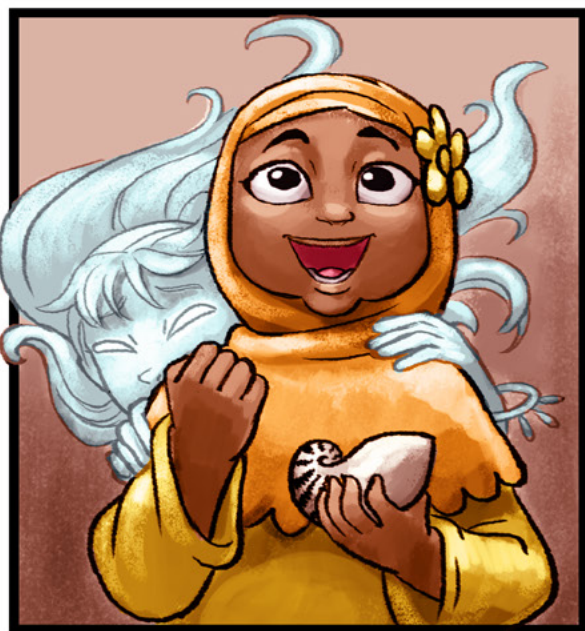
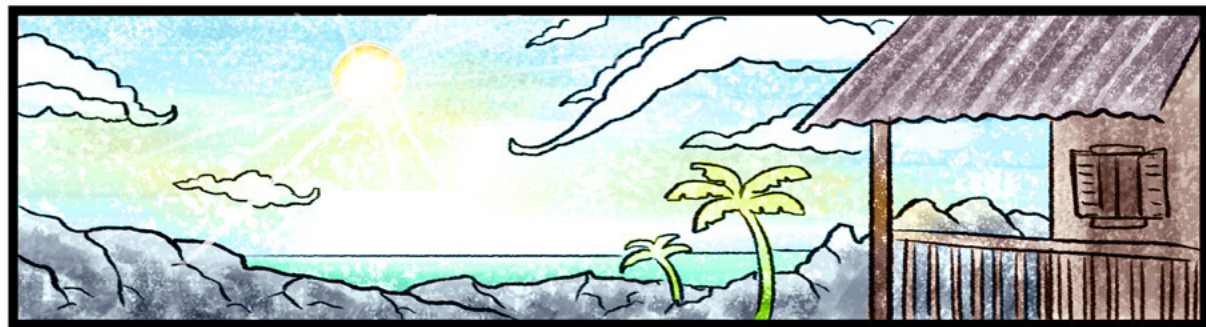


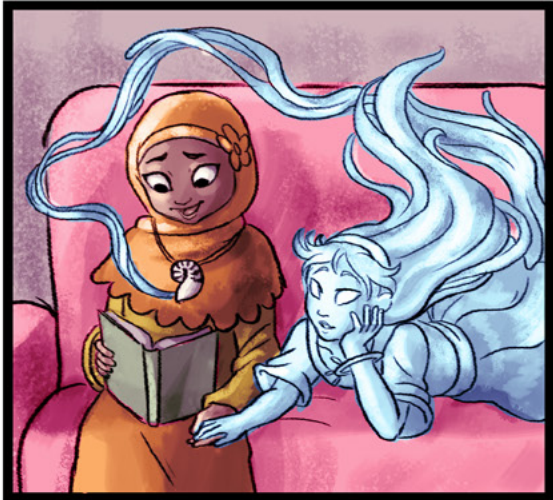
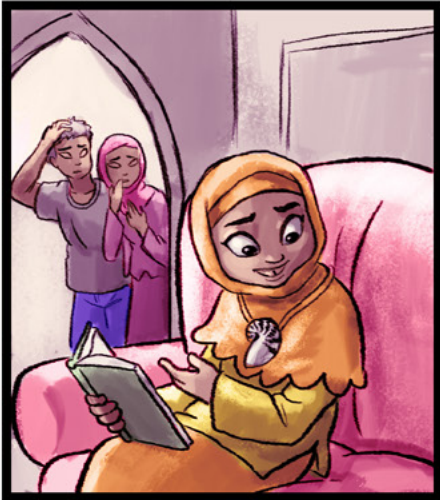
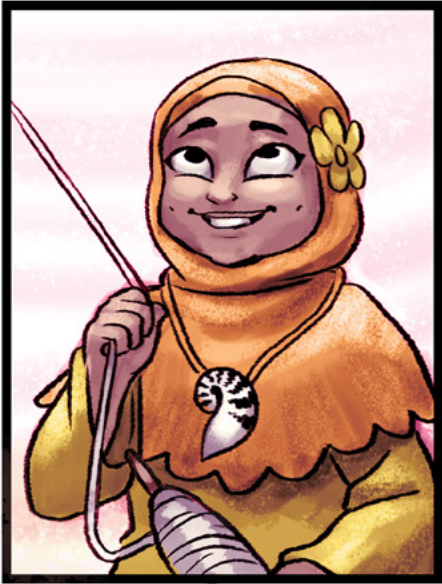
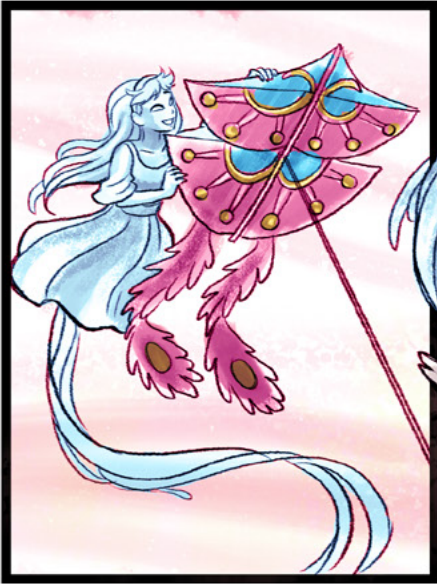


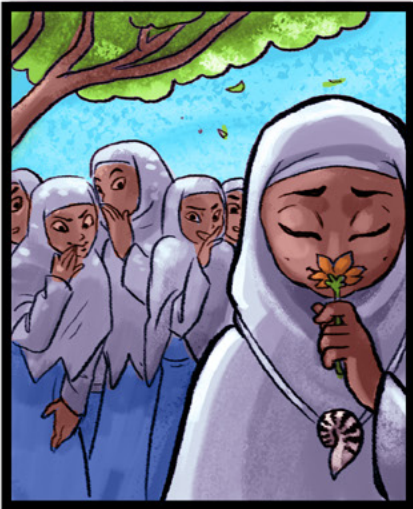
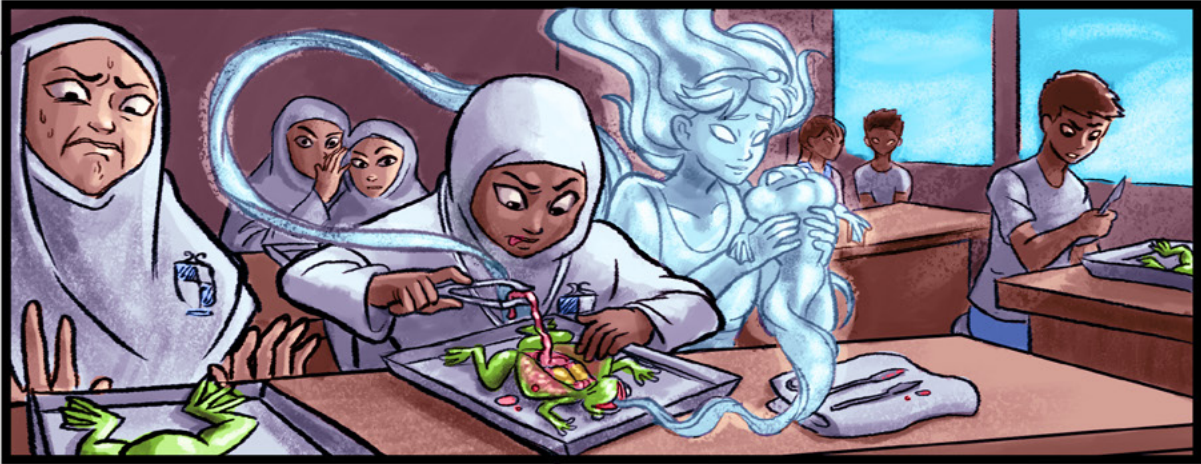


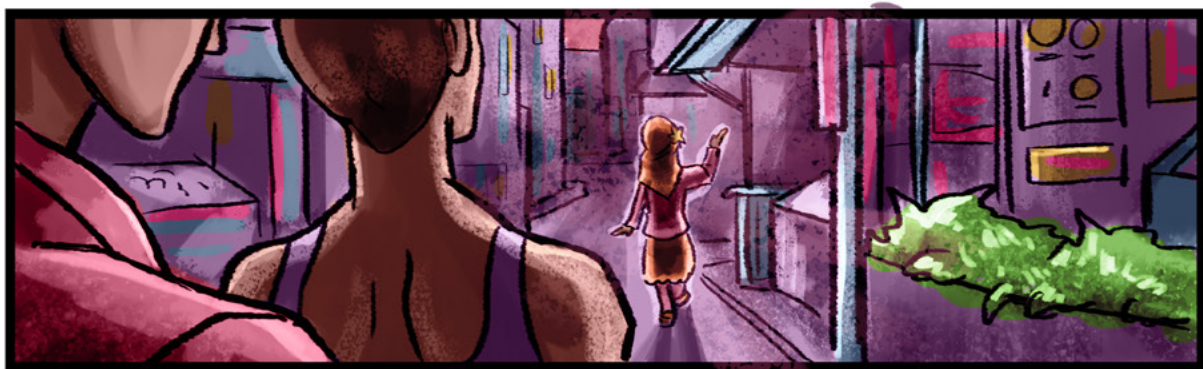
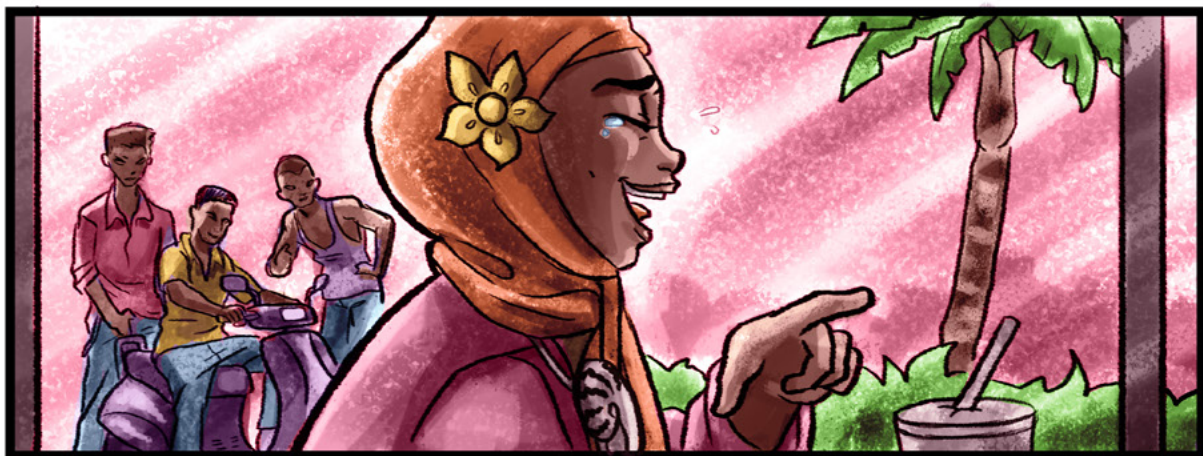
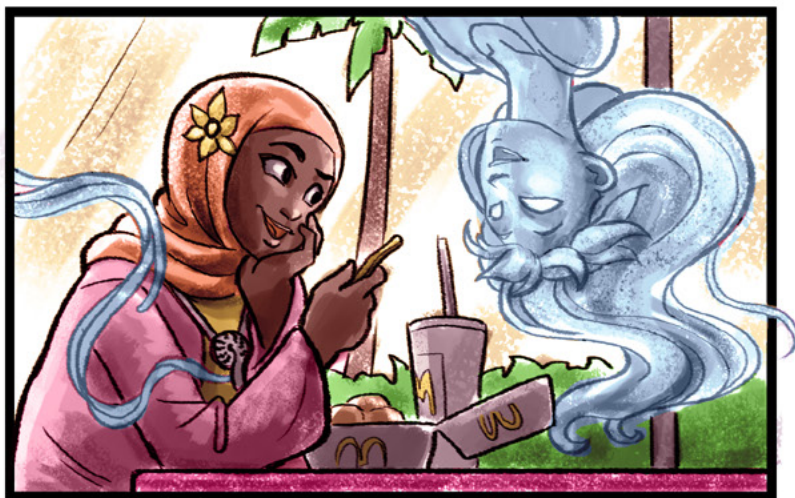
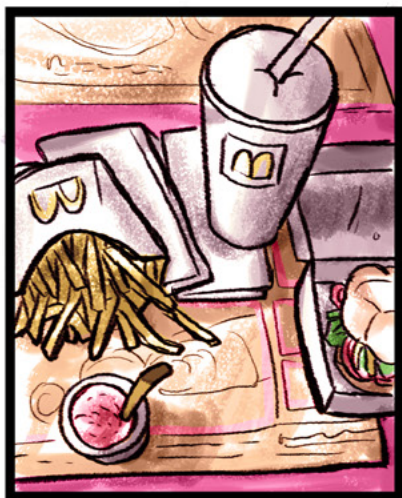
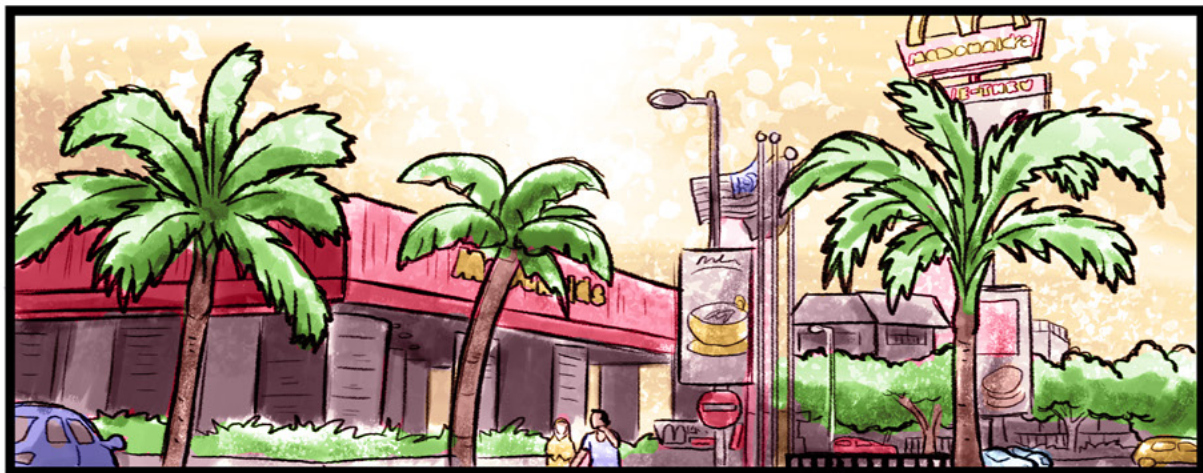




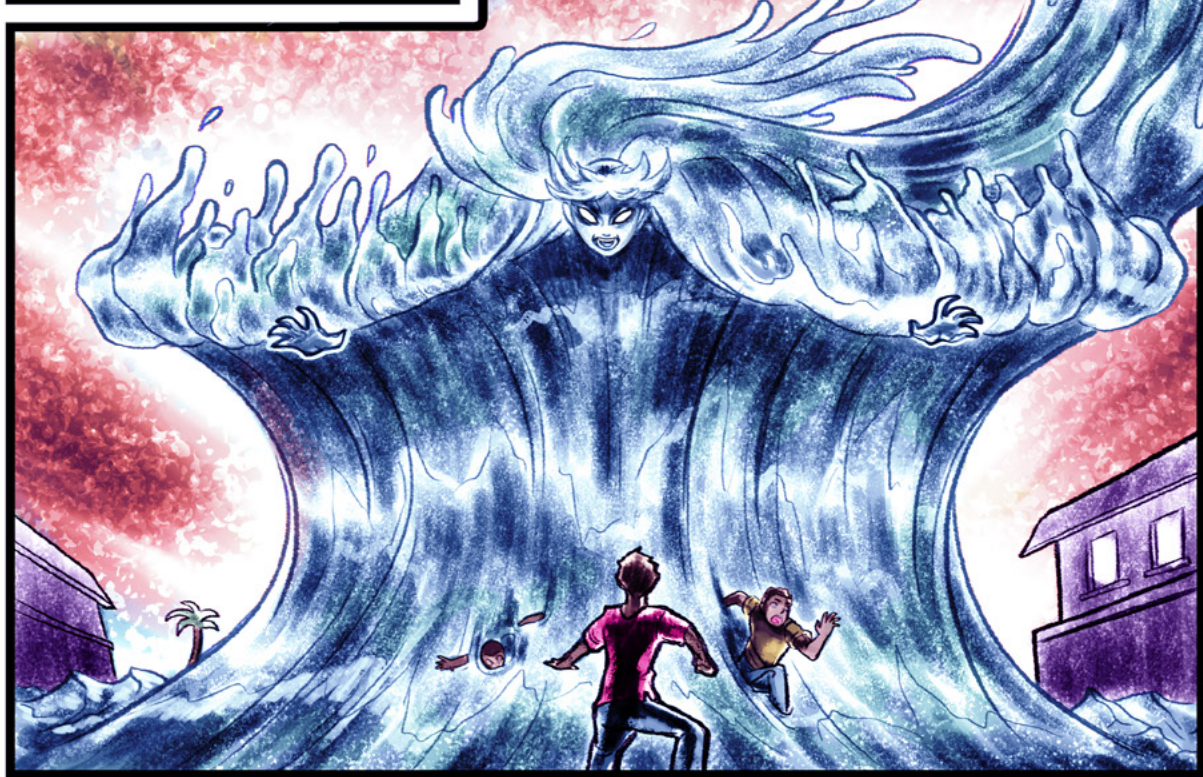
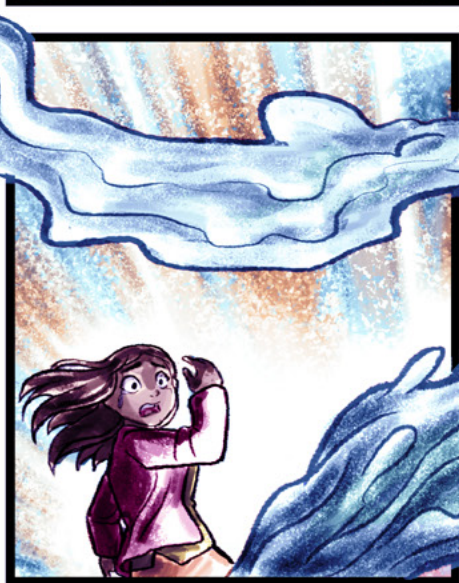
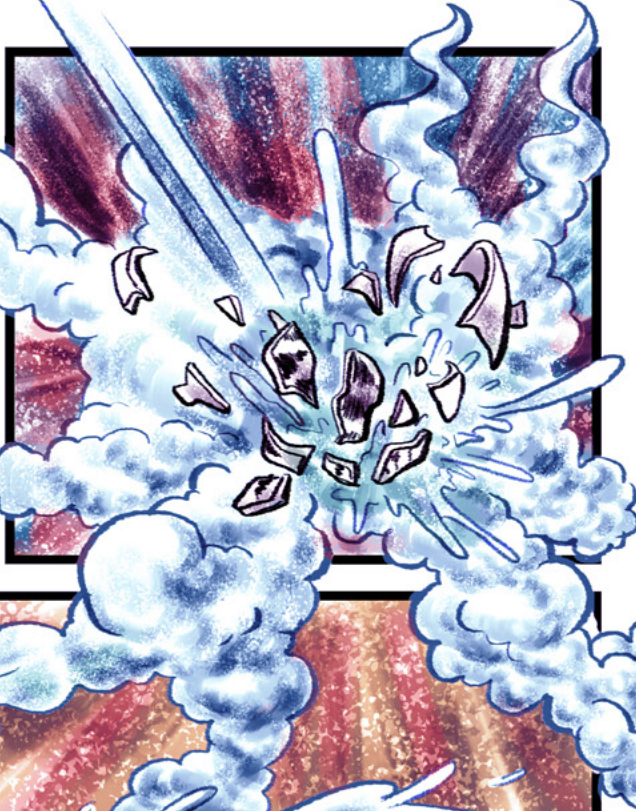
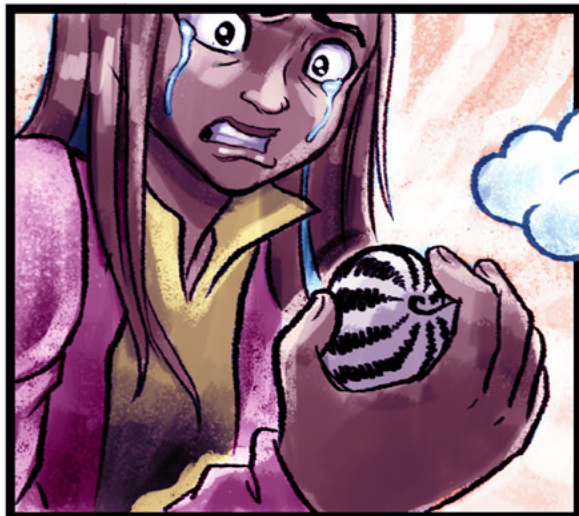


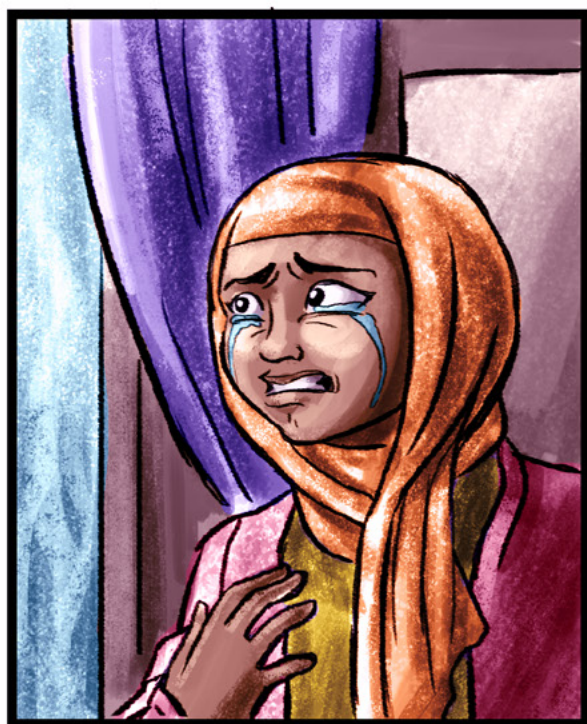
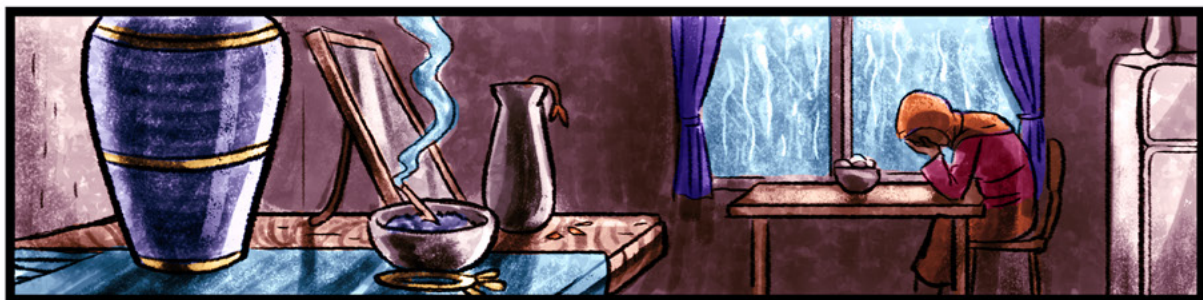
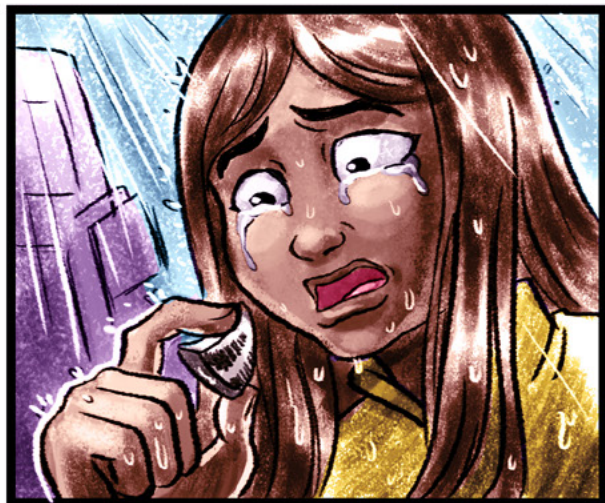
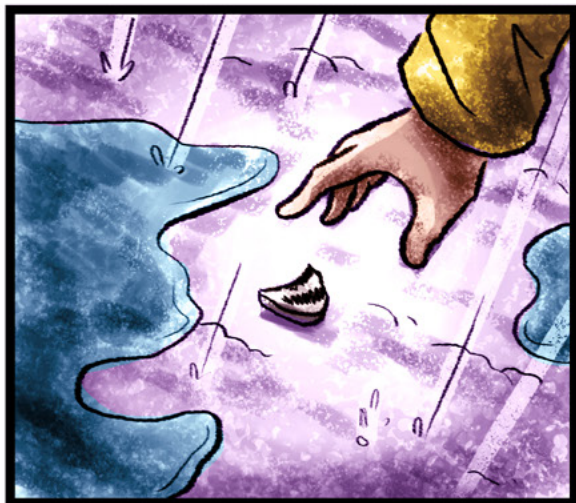
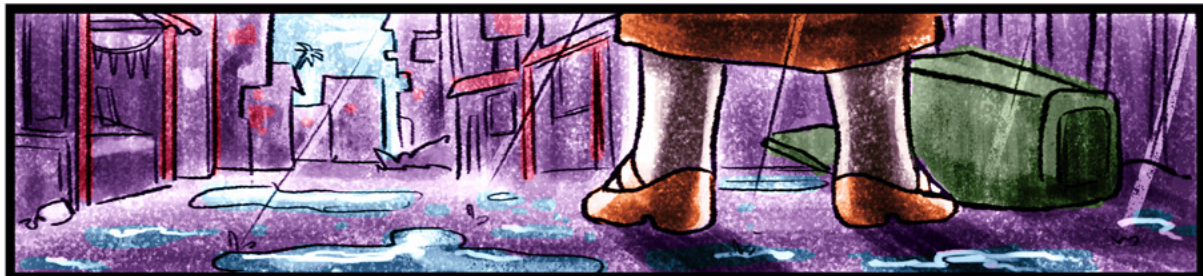


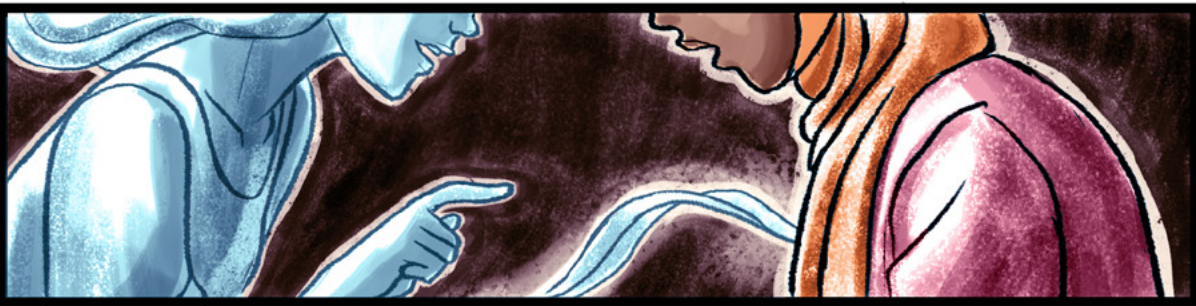
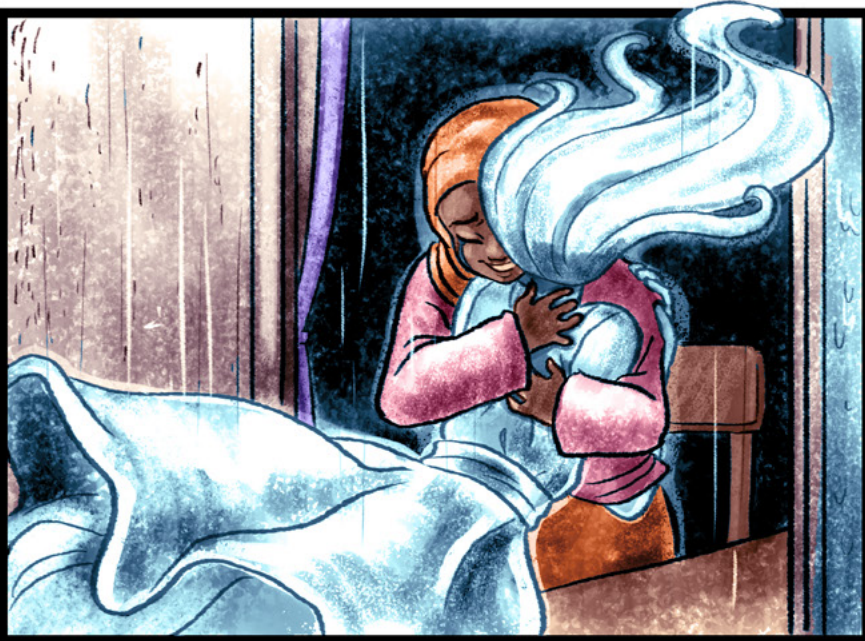
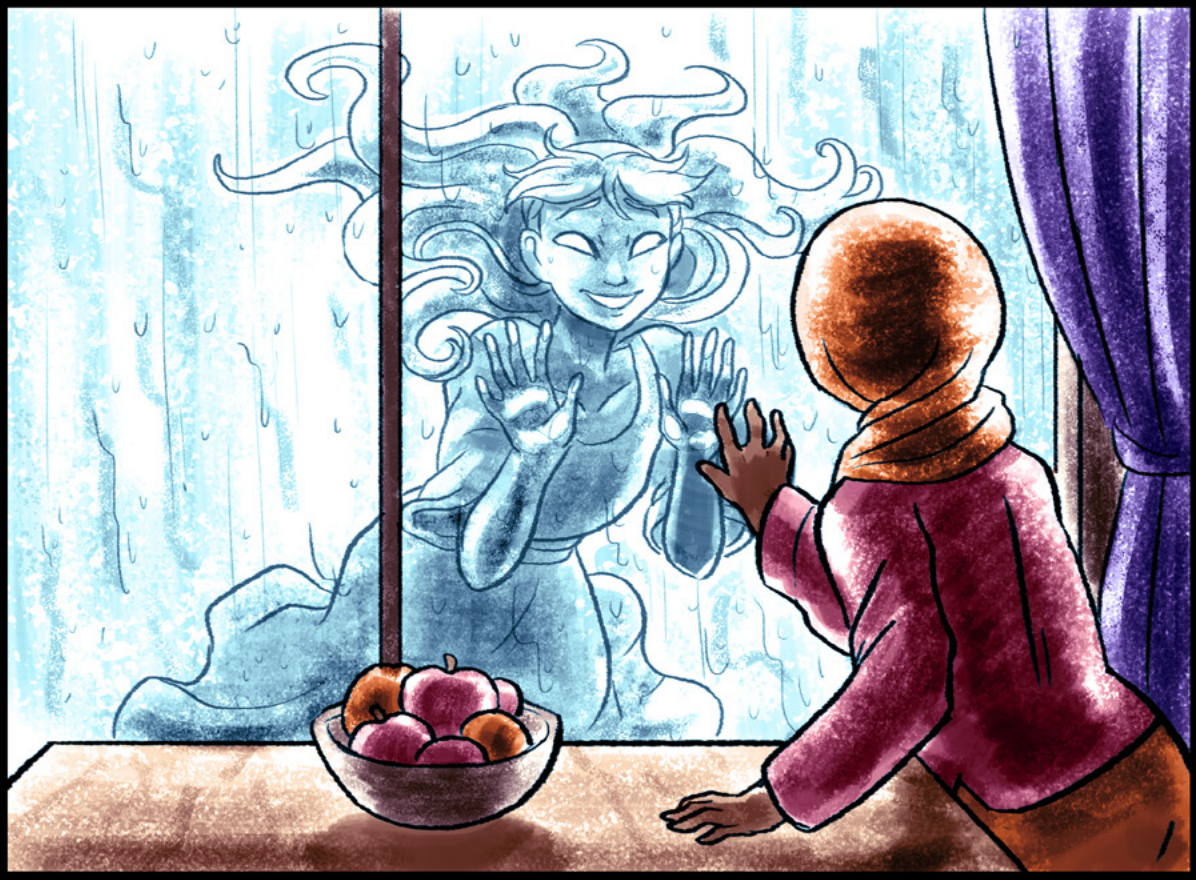


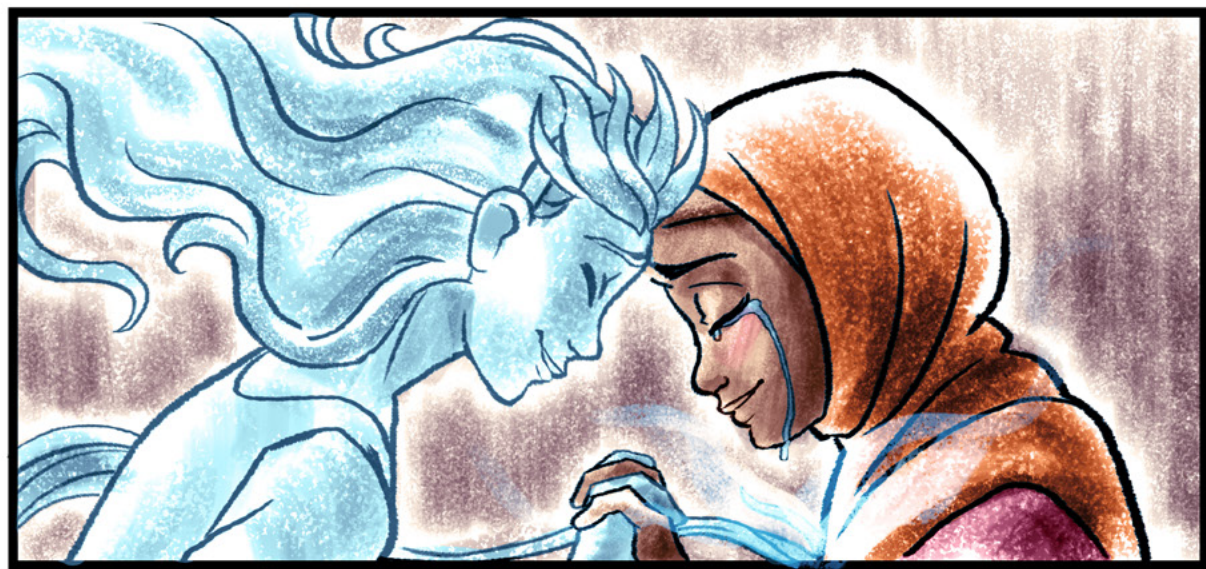
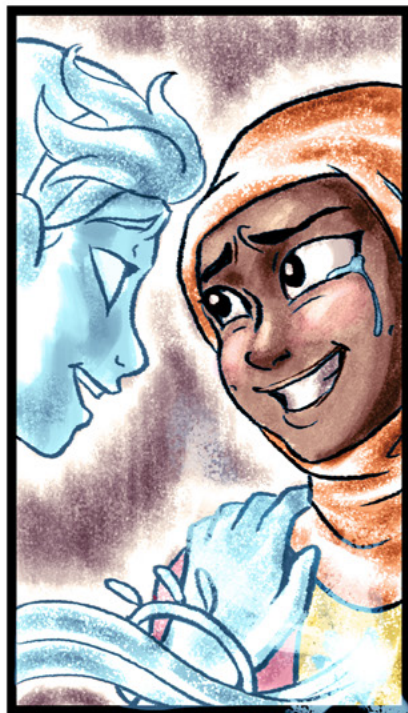
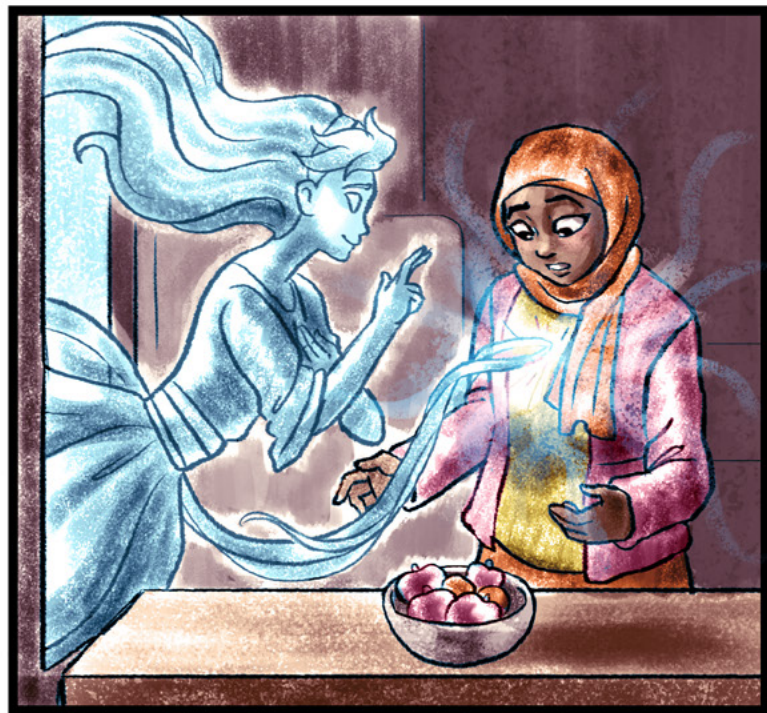








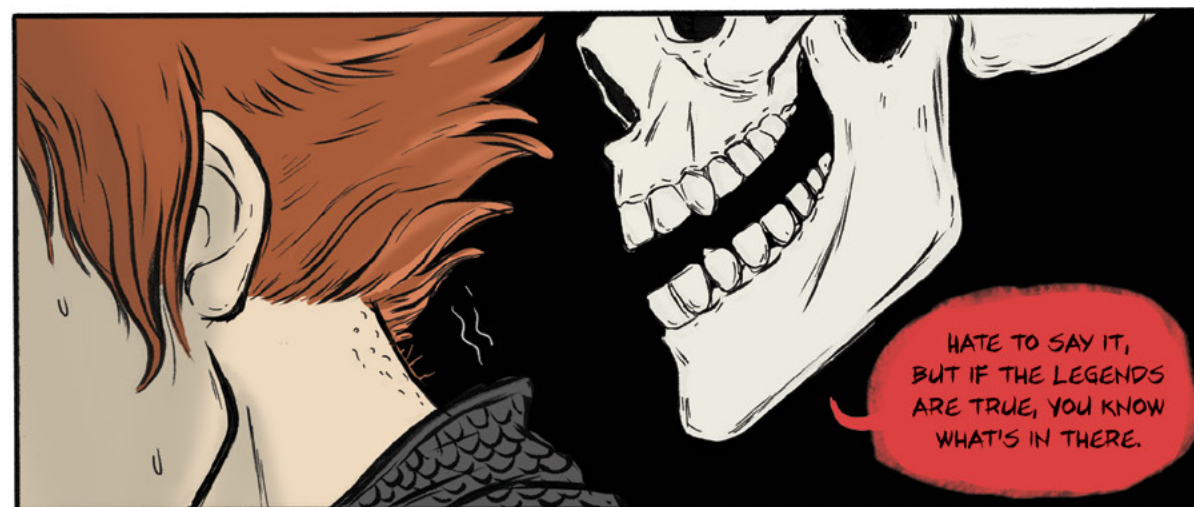


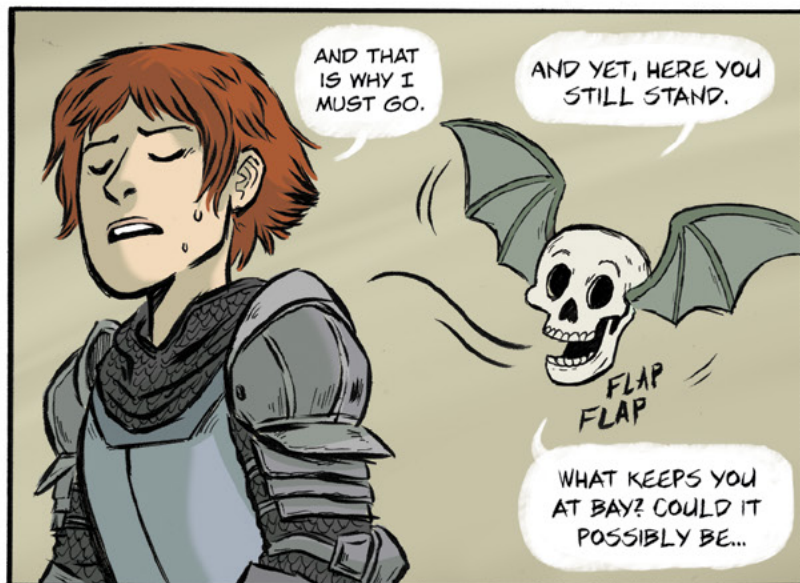


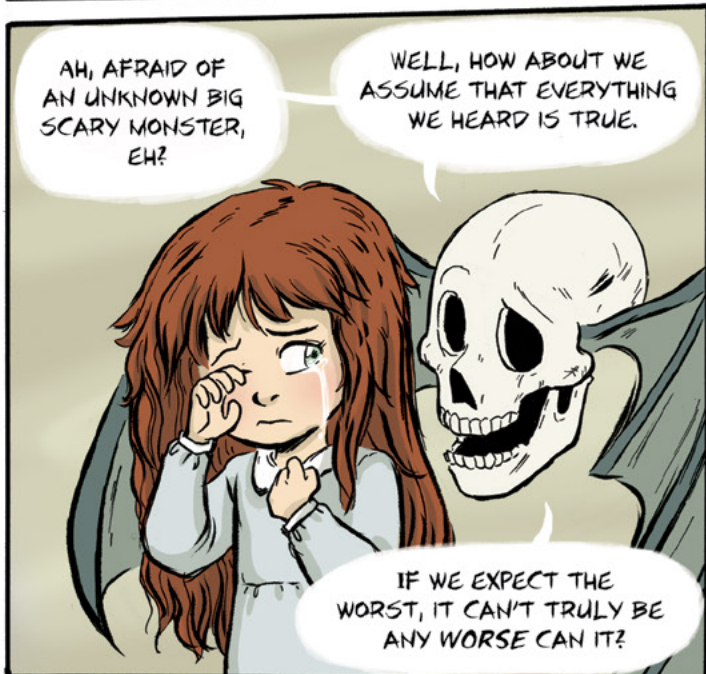
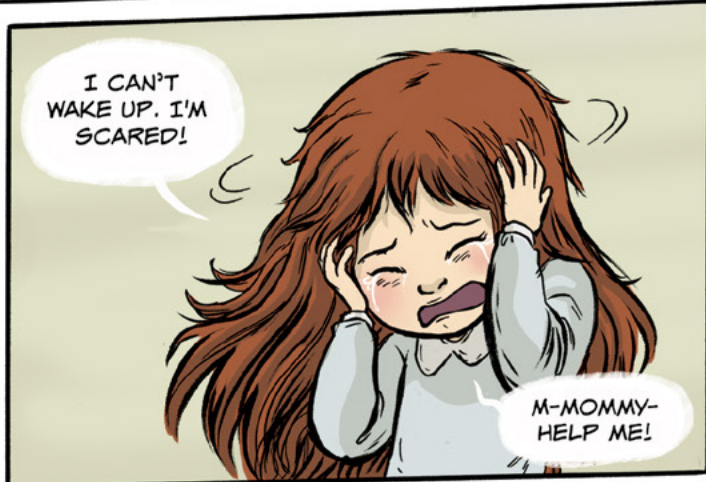
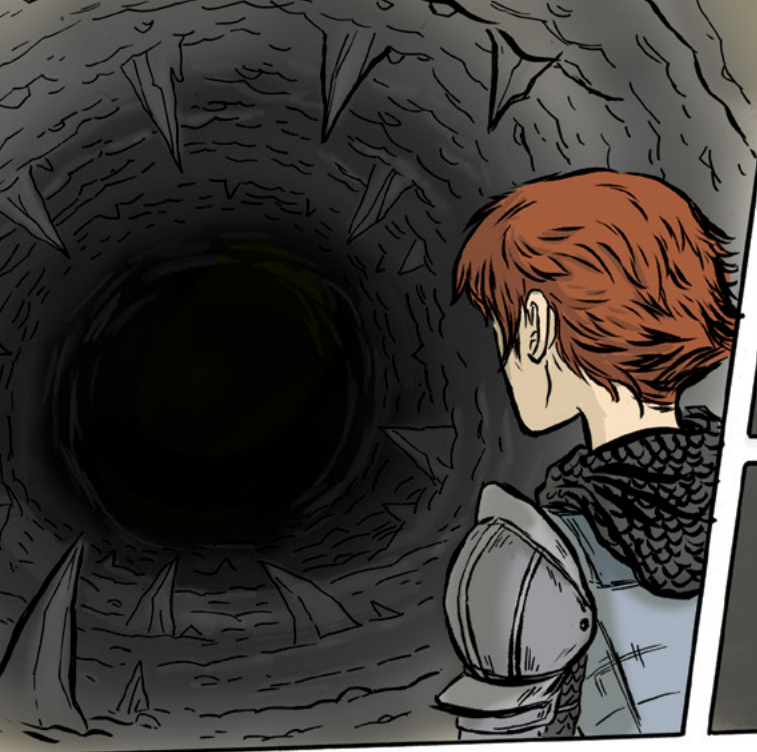


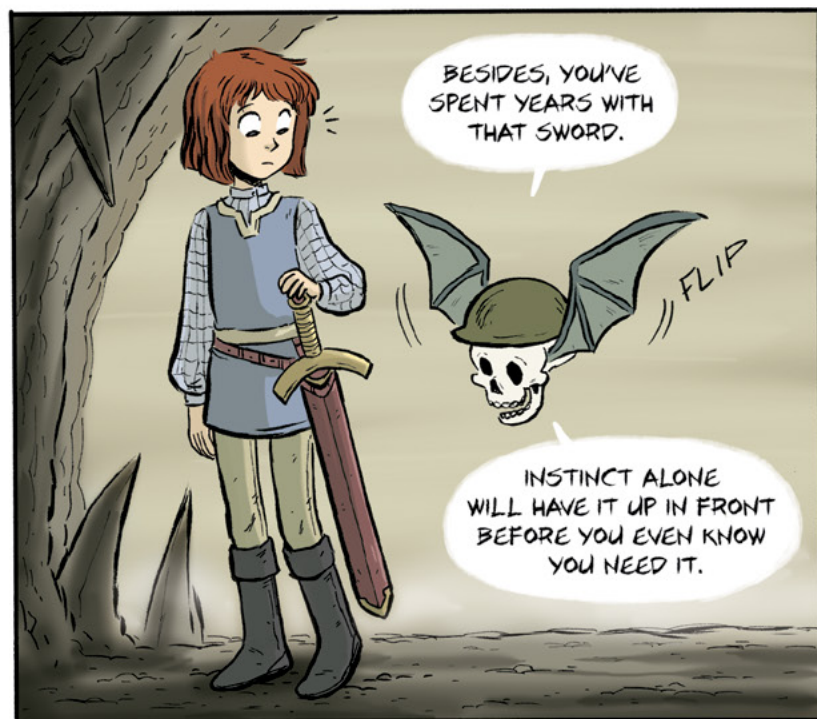
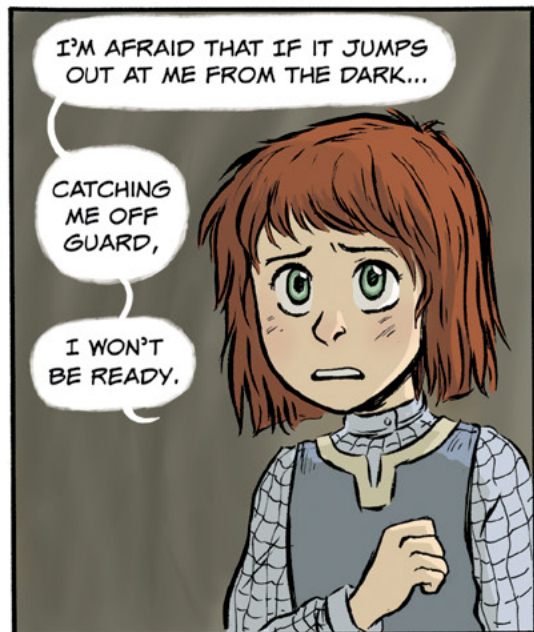
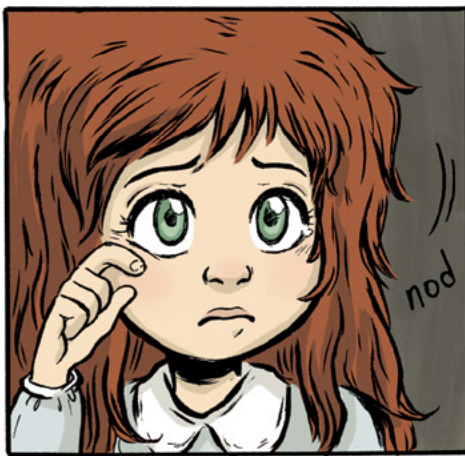
WHAT FEAR SAID

KATIE & STEVEN
SHANAHAN











EVEN
SO...



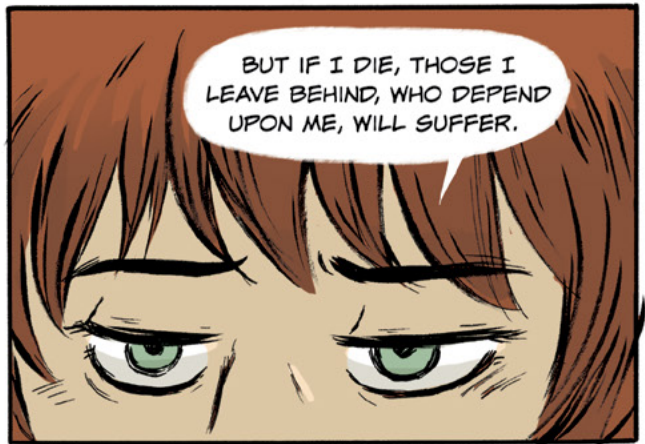
ALL MY TRAINING,
MY ARMOR, IT MAY NOT
BE ENOUGH.

IF ALL GOES
WRONG, IT COULD
VERY WELL KILL
ME.



OOO, THAT'S POPULAR.
IF IT'S DEATH YOU FEAR, YOU
MAY HAVE TO GET IN LINE.

FUN FACT, THE
WORLD'S SECOND
GREATEST FEAR IS
PUBLIC SPEAKING.



BUT IF I DIE, THOSE I
LEAVE BEHIND, WHO DEPEND
UPON ME, WILL SUFFER.



HMM, I AGREE YOU
WILL BE MISSED
DEARLY.

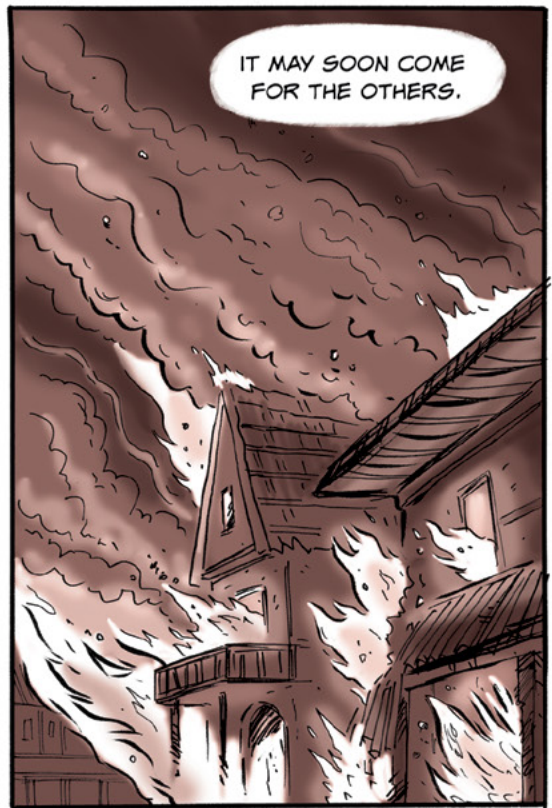
YET TIME WILL EASE THE STING AND THE
WOUNDED WILL LIVE ON, CARRYING YOU IN
THEIR MEMORIES. BUT I THINK YOU'VE
TOUCHED ON SOMETHING...



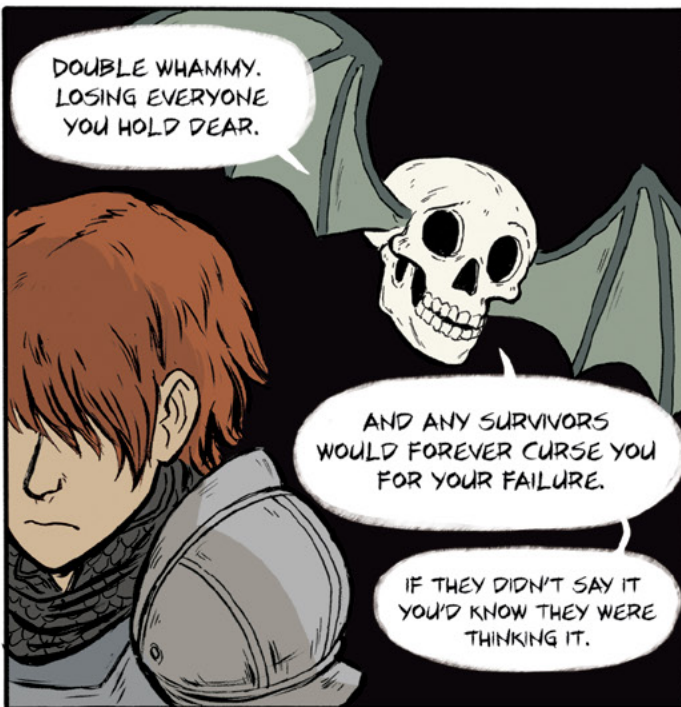
IF I FAIL TO DESTROY IT...



IF IT LIVES ON...



IT MAY SOON COME FOR THE OTHERS.



DOUBLE WHAMMY.
LOSING EVERYONE
YOU HOLD DEAR.

AND ANY SURVIVORS
WOULD FOREVER CURSE YOU
FOR YOUR FAILURE.

IF THEY DIDN'T SAY IT
YOU'D KNOW THEY WERE
THINKING IT.

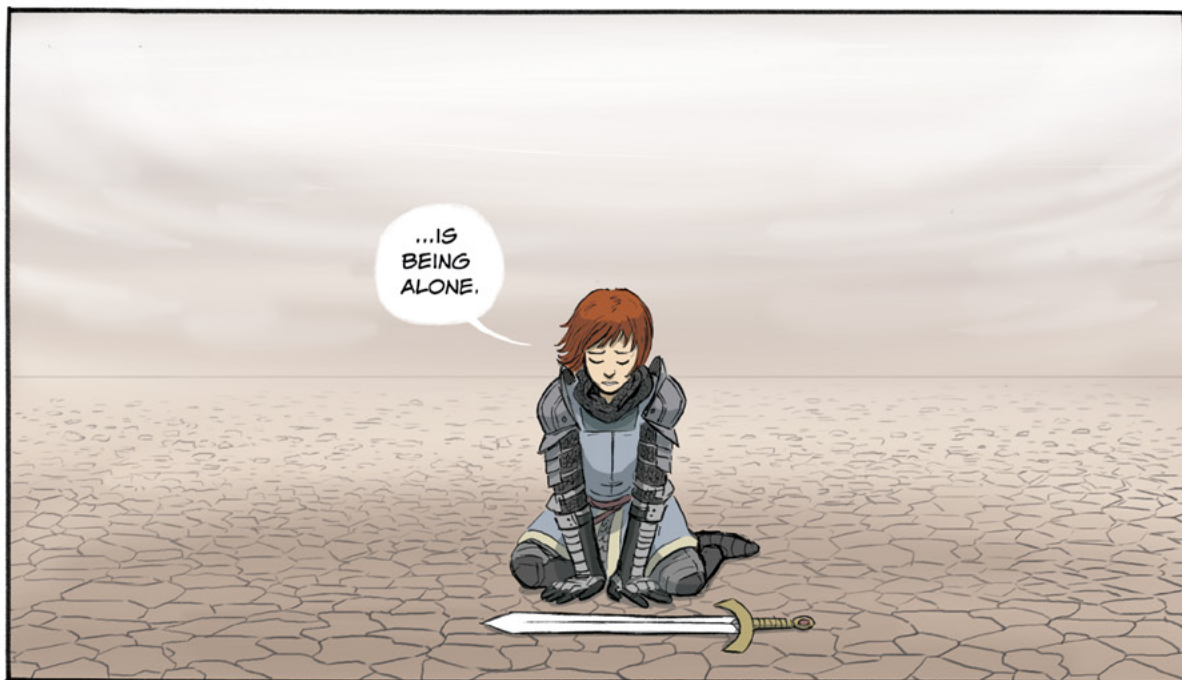


OUR THOUGHT GAME
IS NEARLY COMPLETE.

YOU DON'T ACTUALLY FEAR
WHAT IS IN THIS CAVE, DO YOU NOW?
YOU FEAR WHAT IT COULD MEAN...



WHAT I
FEAR MOST...





A whimsical illustration of a young girl with long, wavy blonde hair and a small blue arrow tattoo on her forehead. She is wearing a dark blue winter coat with a grey fur collar and is hugging a small brown rabbit. The rabbit is also wearing a dark blue coat with a green collar and a small bell. They are in a snowy forest with large, gnarled trees and falling snow. The title "Winter's Gift" is written in a large, white, stylized font across the middle of the image.

Winter's Gift

Story by Joanne Webster
Art by Isabelle Melançon
Letters by Megan Lavey-Heaton



LONG AGO, THE SEASONS OF SPRING,
SUMMER, AND AUTUMN BESTOWED GIFTS ON
THEIR FAVORITE ANIMALS.

SHARP TALONS WENT TO THE HAWKS. SPEED
AND STRENGTH TO THE WOLVES. SWIFTNESS
AND CUNNING
TO THE FOXES.

TO THE RABBITS, THESE CHANGES IN THEIR
PREDATORS BROUGHT FEAR.

IT'S NOT *FAIR!*
WINTER WILL BE HERE
SOON. WE'LL NEVER
SURVIVE THE COLD AND
THE SNOWS!

THERE'S
A SOLUTION!
WINTER HASN'T
BESTOWED A GIFT
YET! HE COULD
HELP US!

WHY
WOULD *HE*
BOTHER? WINTER'S
DARK AND COLD. HE
DOESN'T CARE ABOUT
US.

WE'LL NEVER KNOW
UNLESS WE ASK.

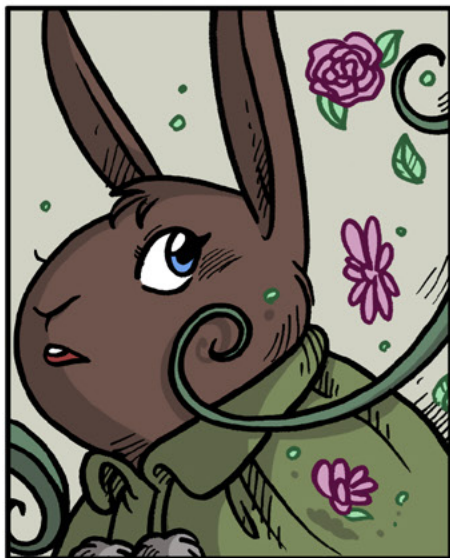
WINTER'S SO FAR *AWAY*.
YOU HAVE TO CROSS THE
OTHER SEASONS FIRST.

MY MIND'S
MADE UP.

IT'S
BETTER
TO DIE
TRYING THAN
BE AFRAID
ALL THE TIME.

DESPITE THE PROTESTS,
BUNNY SET OUT TO FIND WINTER.

THIS ISN'T BAD
SO FAR ...



WHAT AN
ADORABLE LITTLE
RABBIT! WHY ARE YOU
SO FAR FROM
HOME?

I'M ON
MY WAY
TO SEE
WINTER.

PLEASE,
SPRING, LET
ME PASS!

WINTER? WHO'D
WANT TO SEE
THAT GROUCH?

YOU'RE FAR
TOO ADORABLE
TO LET GO.

YOU'LL BE MY
NEW PET!




THERE! HOW'S
YOUR NEW
HOME? WE
COULD ADD
DAISIES TO
THE BARS!

WELL, YES, THE
CAGE IS VERY
PRETTY ...

BUT SPRING,
AREN'T YOU AFRAID
OF SOMEONE
BREAKING IN AND
EATING ME?

FLOWERS
AND VINES
AREN'T THAT
SOLID.



I
SUPPOSE
... BUT WHAT
ELSE COULD
I DO?



IF YOU REINFORCE
THE CAGE WITH IRON BARS FROM
THE WEST, THEN NO ONE CAN BREAK
IN AND EAT ME.

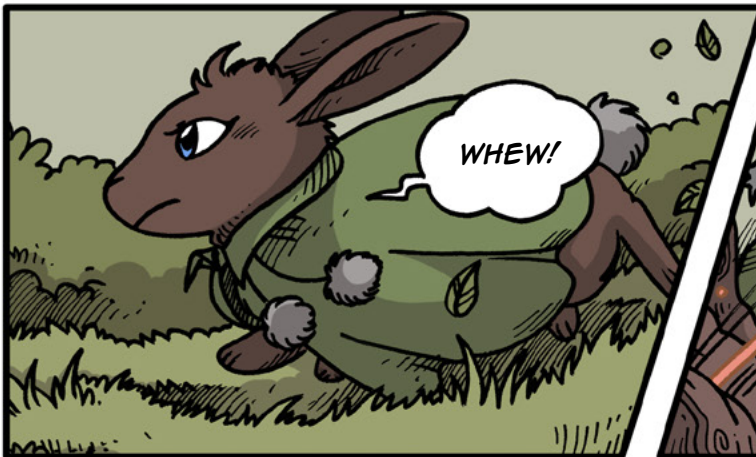


BRILLIANT! I'LL
FETCH SOME!

I'LL BE BACK
SOON, LITTLE ONE!



GNAW
GNAW





UM ... OK ... UH ... BUT HOW CAN YOU PROPERLY EAT ME IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT SEASONINGS?

SEASONINGS?

HERBS THAT HELP MAKE A MEAL TASTIER. SURELY A FOOD EXPERT SUCH AS YOURSELF WOULD KNOW OF THEM.



OF COURSE I KNOW THEM.

YOU CAN'T COOK ME WITHOUT THEM.

THEN REMAIN HERE AND I'LL FETCH THEM.

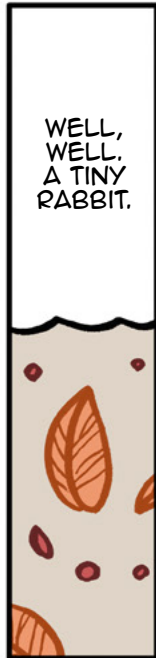
THE RIGHT ONES ARE IN THE FAR SOUTH.



AS IF GOING TO THE FAR SOUTH WAS A CHALLENGE FOR SUMMER. I WILL BE BACK TO PREPARE YOU, MY DELICIOUS MEAL.



WHEW.



WELL,
WELL,
A TINY
RABBIT.



YOUR MAGNIFICENT FUR IS
EXACTLY WHAT I NEED FOR A
NEW HAT!

AGAIN?

... I'M SORRY. I
CAN'T BECOME
YOUR HAT. I MUST
SEE WINTER!

HIM? HE HAS NO
FASHION SENSE! HE WEARS
NOTHING BUT WHITE. YOUR
FUR WOULD BE SUCH A
WASTE ON HIM.



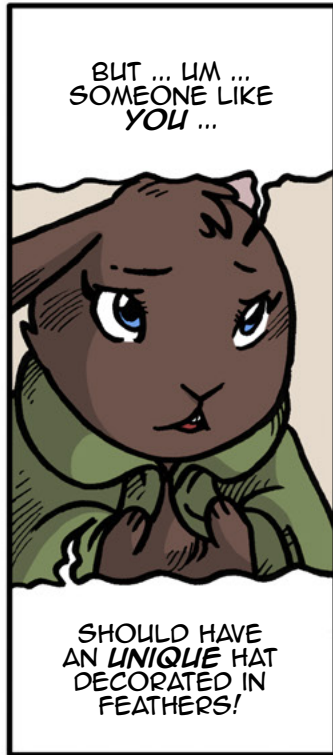
STAY HERE WITH ME,
AND YOU'LL HAVE THE
GREAT HONOR OF
BECOMING MY
NEWEST HAT.

I SUPPOSE I'D MAKE
A GOOD HAT. BUT WHAT
WOULD YOU DECORATE ME
WITH?



ARE YOU
SUGGESTING
I DON'T KNOW HOW
TO DECORATE A
HAT?

NO.

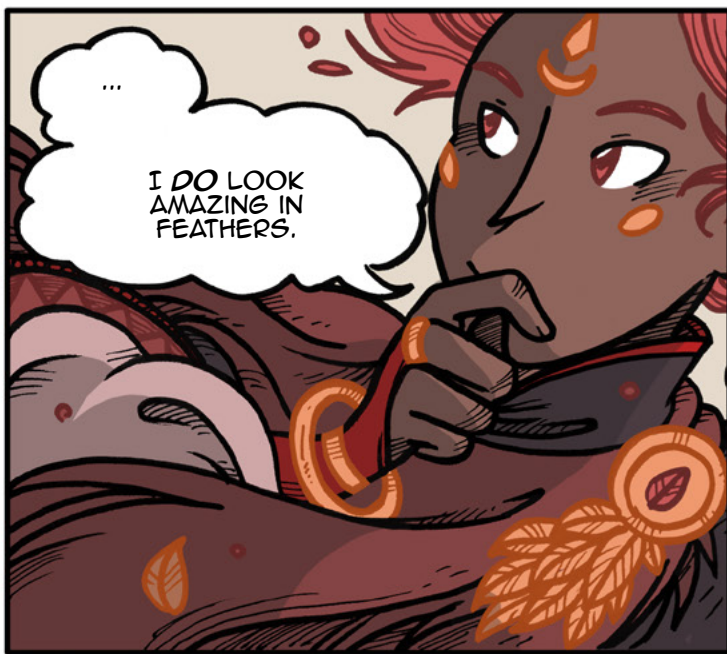


BUT ... UM ...
SOMEONE LIKE
YOU ...

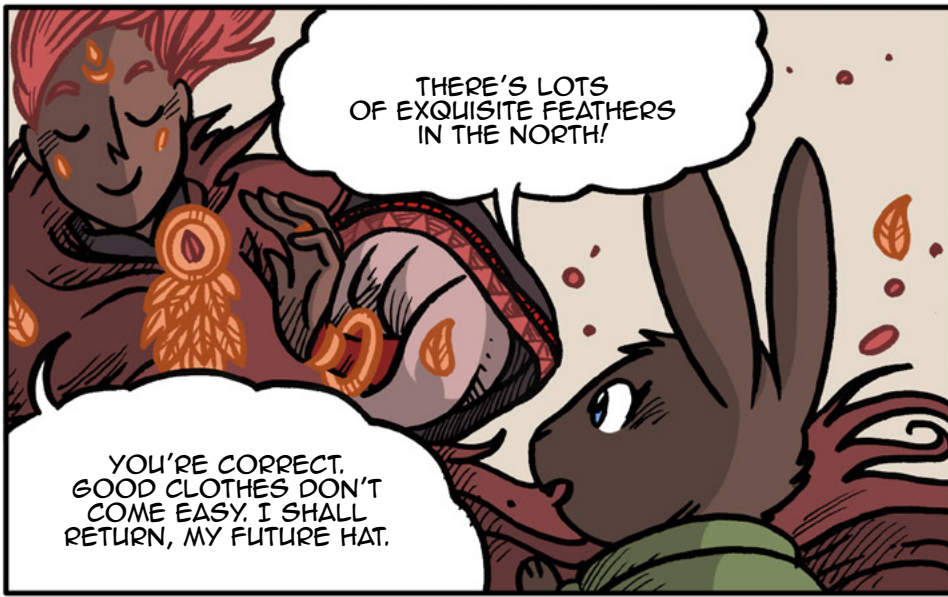
SHOULD HAVE
AN *UNIQUE* HAT
DECORATED IN
FEATHERS!



DON'T YOU
THINK SO?



...
I DO LOOK
AMAZING IN
FEATHERS.

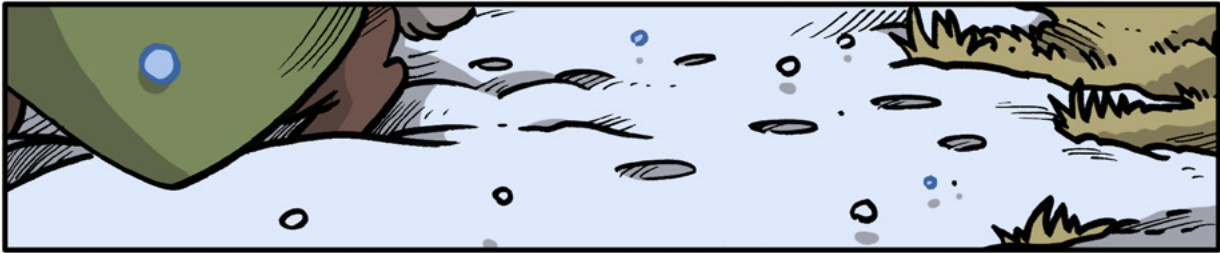


THERE'S LOTS
OF EXQUISITE FEATHERS
IN THE NORTH!

YOU'RE CORRECT.
GOOD CLOTHES DON'T
COME EASY. I SHALL
RETURN, MY FUTURE HAT.



WHEW.



OH!



HEE!!

WOOOO!!!



LITTLE
RABBIT.

WHAT ARE
YOU DOING?



WHY, I'M PLAYING
IN THE SNOW!

THIS IS *NOT* A
PLACE TO PLAY. DO
YOU KNOW WHERE
YOU ARE, OR WHO I
AM?

YOU'RE
WINTER!

I'VE COME
A LONG WAY
TO SEE YOU.

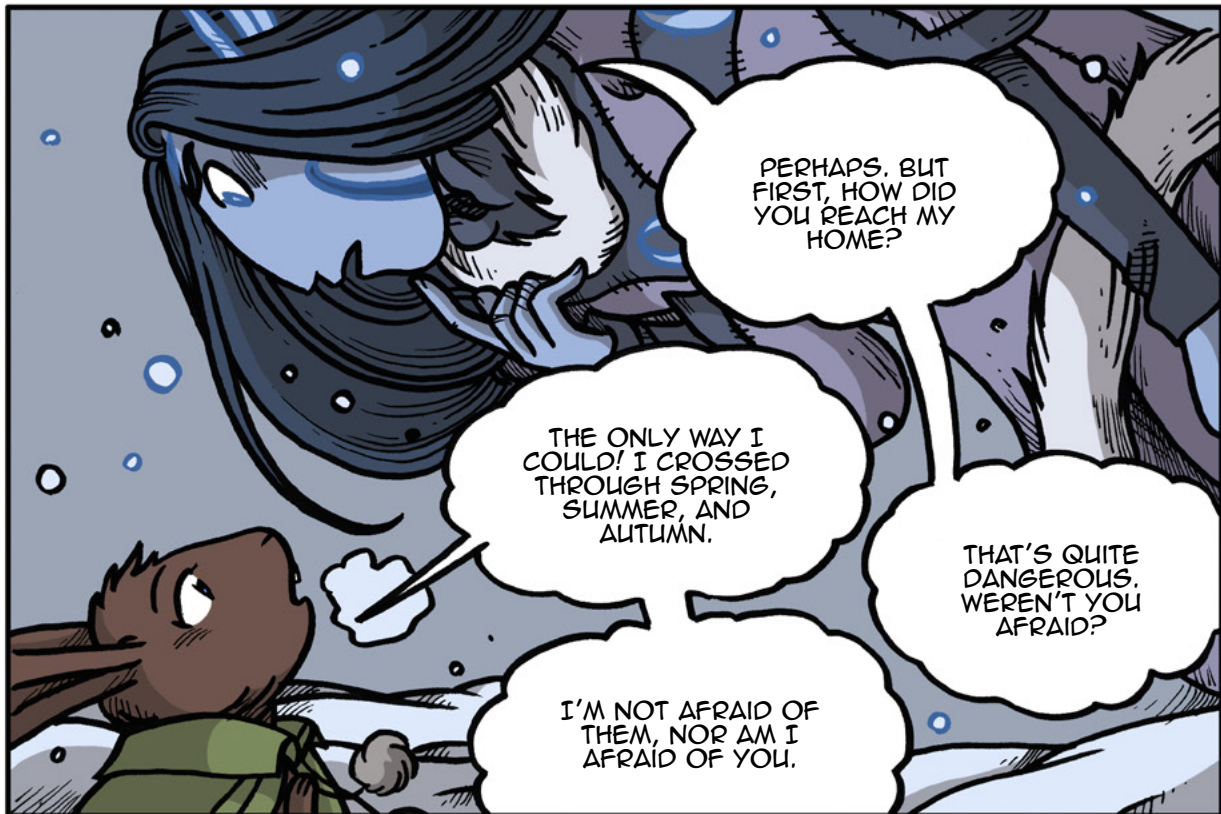


OH?

NO ONE
BOTHERS TO
COME SEE ME.
WHY SHOULD
YOU?



THE OTHER SEASONS HAVE BLESSED
THE HUNTING ANIMALS. COULD YOU
PLEASE GIVE THE RABBITS
A BLESSING?



PERHAPS. BUT
FIRST, HOW DID
YOU REACH MY
HOME?

THE ONLY WAY I
COULD! I CROSSED
THROUGH SPRING,
SUMMER, AND
AUTUMN.

THAT'S QUITE
DANGEROUS.
WEREN'T YOU
AFRAID?

I'M NOT AFRAID OF
THEM, NOR AM I
AFRAID OF YOU.



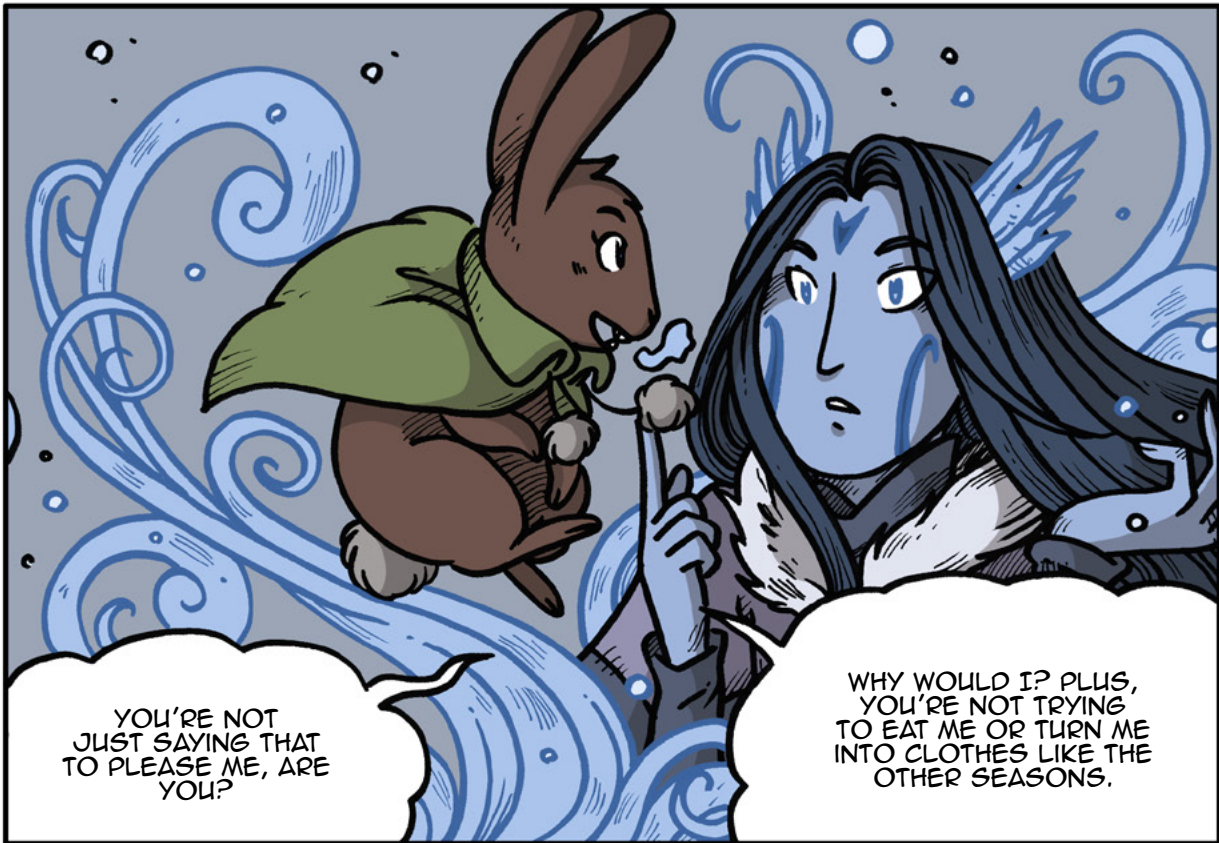
WELL, YOU
SHOULD BE AFRAID!

WINDS THAT HOWL.
COLD THAT BITES.

THAT
IS WINTER.

HOW'S THAT SCARY?
I LOVE SNOW! I SNEAK
OUT OF MY BURROW TO
PLAY IN IT ALL THE TIME!





YOU'RE NOT
JUST SAYING THAT
TO PLEASE ME, ARE
YOU?

WHY WOULD I? PLUS,
YOU'RE NOT TRYING
TO EAT ME OR TURN ME
INTO CLOTHES LIKE THE
OTHER SEASONS.



YOU ARE THE FIRST
TO TRAVEL THIS FAR
AND TO SPEAK KINDLY
TO ME.

ALLOW ME TO USE MY
WINDS TO ESCORT YOU
HOME.



DEAR
RABBITS!

I HAVE COME TO
PRESENT YOU
WITH A GIFT!

DURING WINTER,
YOUR FUR WILL TURN
AS WHITE AS SNOW
SO THAT YOU MAY
HIDE FROM THE
HUNTERS WHO
STALK YOU.



FOR YOU,
BRAVE BUNNY,
I SHALL GRANT
YOU AN EXTRA
GIFT.



NOT ONLY WILL YOUR FUR TURN
WHITE IN THE WINTER, BUT I HAVE
ENCHANTED YOUR COAT SO YOU
SHALL GAIN A HUMAN FORM LIKE
I HAVE.

OH, THANK
YOU!

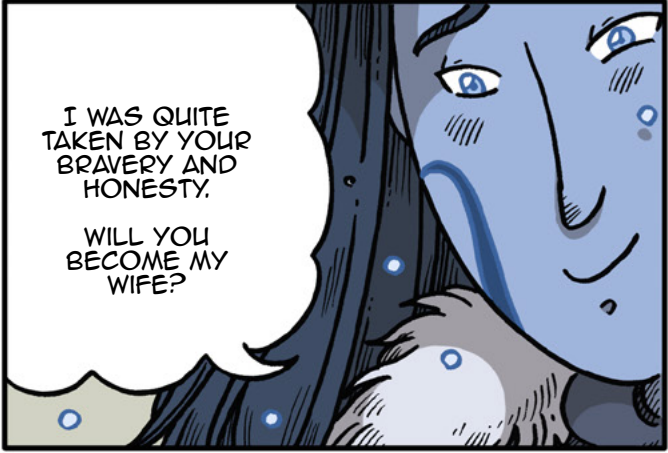
THANK YOU SO
MUCH, WINTER!



NOW I CAN
DO *THIS*!

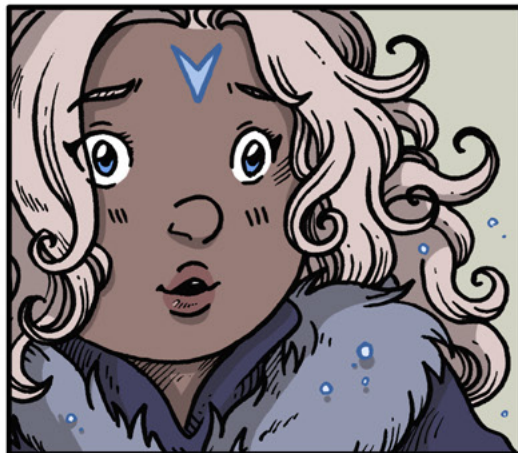


IN TURN,
BUNNY, WILL
YOU GRANT ME A
BOON AS WELL?



I WAS QUITE
TAKEN BY YOUR
BRAVERY AND
HONESTY.

WILL YOU
BECOME MY
WIFE?

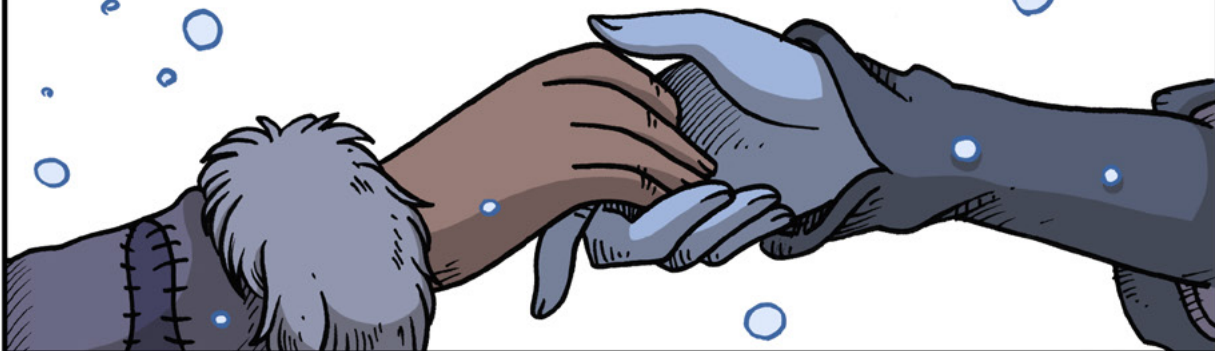


YES.

FROM THEN ON, BLUNNY WOULD SPEND HER
SPRING AND SUMMERS WITH HER FAMILY.
COME AUTUMN SHE WOULD DON HER COAT
AND SPEND THE REMAINDER OF THE YEAR
WITH HER HUSBAND.

THEY SAY WHENEVER YOU SEE
SNOWFLAKES AS LARGE AND FLUFFY AS
A RABBIT'S TAIL, IT'S BECAUSE WINTER IS
HAPPILY THINKING ABOUT HIS WIFE.

AND THEIR LOVE WAS ETERNAL,
JUST LIKE THE SEASONS.





BLOOD FROM A STONE

WORDS—TIM FERRARA ART—ANNIE STOLL

tap

tap

tap

tap

tap



YOU'RE
NOT
FRIGHTENED
?

Should I be?



WELL... IT'S A LITTLE STRANGE, STATUE KNOCKING
ON A PERSON'S WINDOW.




Oh I suppose it is.
Gargoyles watch over the
cities. They protect us.



I DON'T THINK I COULD PROTECT
MUCH OF ANYTHING, TO BE HONEST.
I'M DREADEFULY SMALL... THAT'S WHY
I'VE COME HERE. YOU HAVE MAGIC—




Shhh!




Magic isn't
allowed. I could
get in trouble.

THIS HASN'T
STOPPED YOU.



Well... no.

What is it you wanted?
I could try to make you bigger.



IT ISN'T THAT.
IT'S... I WANT TO BE...
ALIVE.

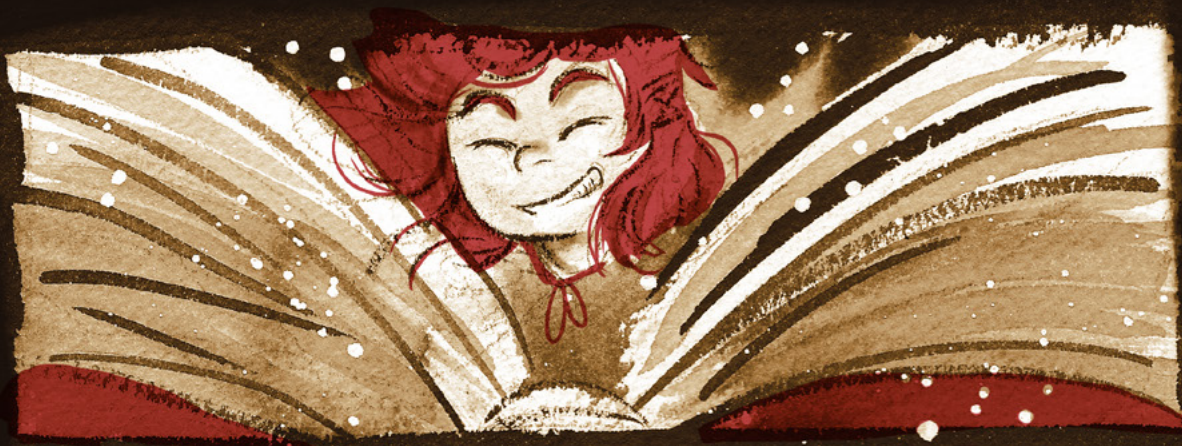
Alive?

MADE FLESH....

FREED FROM THIS STONE BODY.

Then...

I'll try my best!



The first step
is to find out
how alive you
need to be.



Do you have a soul?

DOES HAVING
A SOUL MAKE
ONE ALIVE?

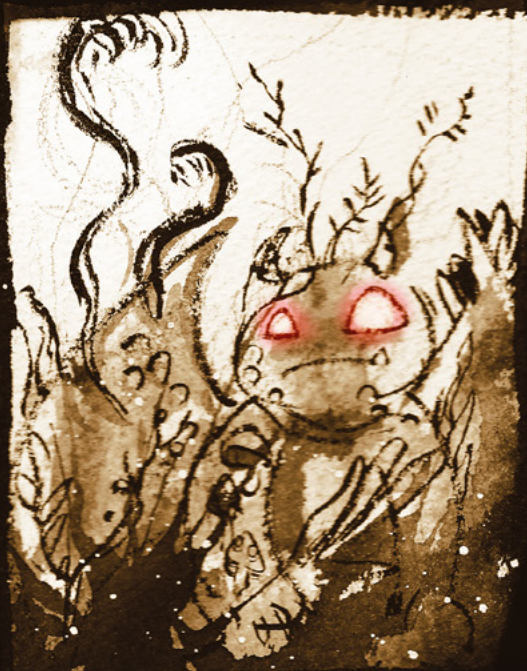
Having a soul
makes you you

I DON'T KNOW IF
I HAVE ONE.

Why don't we just
focus on your physical
body right now.

Let's start with
growth. Bodies need
to grow, right?

IF YOU SAY SO.





Hm.



Let's try breath. Living body's got to breathe!



Well...I have one more.
But it's dangerous.



WHAT IS IT?



Blood.

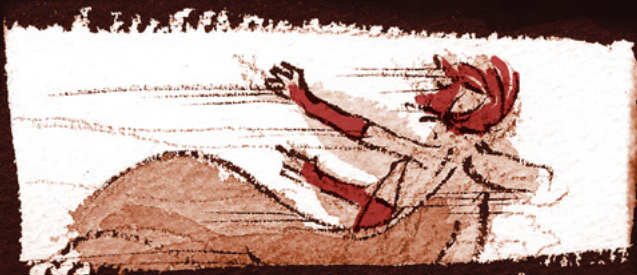




IS IT SUPPOSED
TO DO THAT?



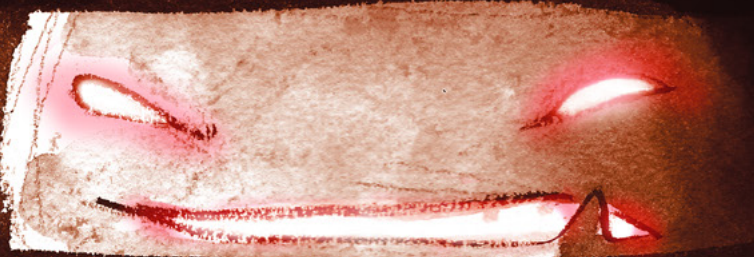
Something's wrong!





CRUNCH!

YOU WON'T
HURT HER!



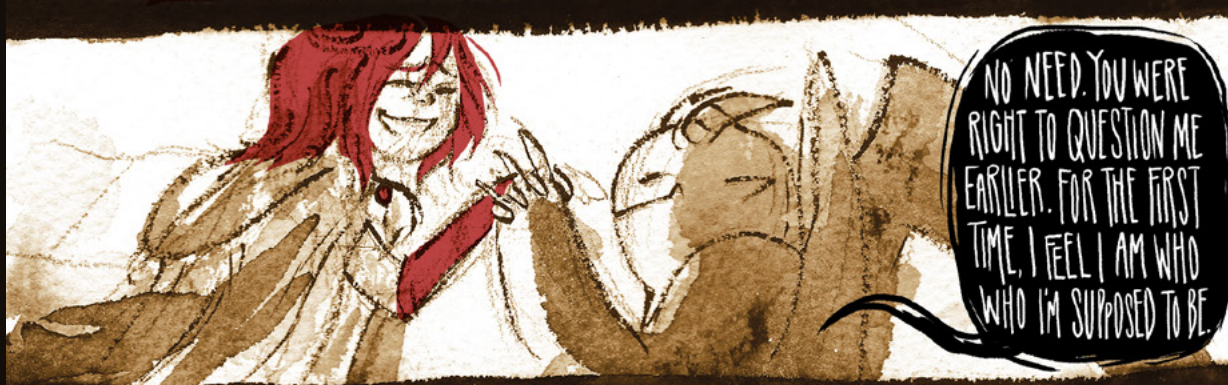
YOU WOK MY
MOUTH!!!



KWA A H!!



I'm so sorry!
I can try again.



NO NEED. YOU WERE
RIGHT TO QUESTION ME
EARLIER. FOR THE FIRST
TIME, I FEEL I AM WHO
WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE.



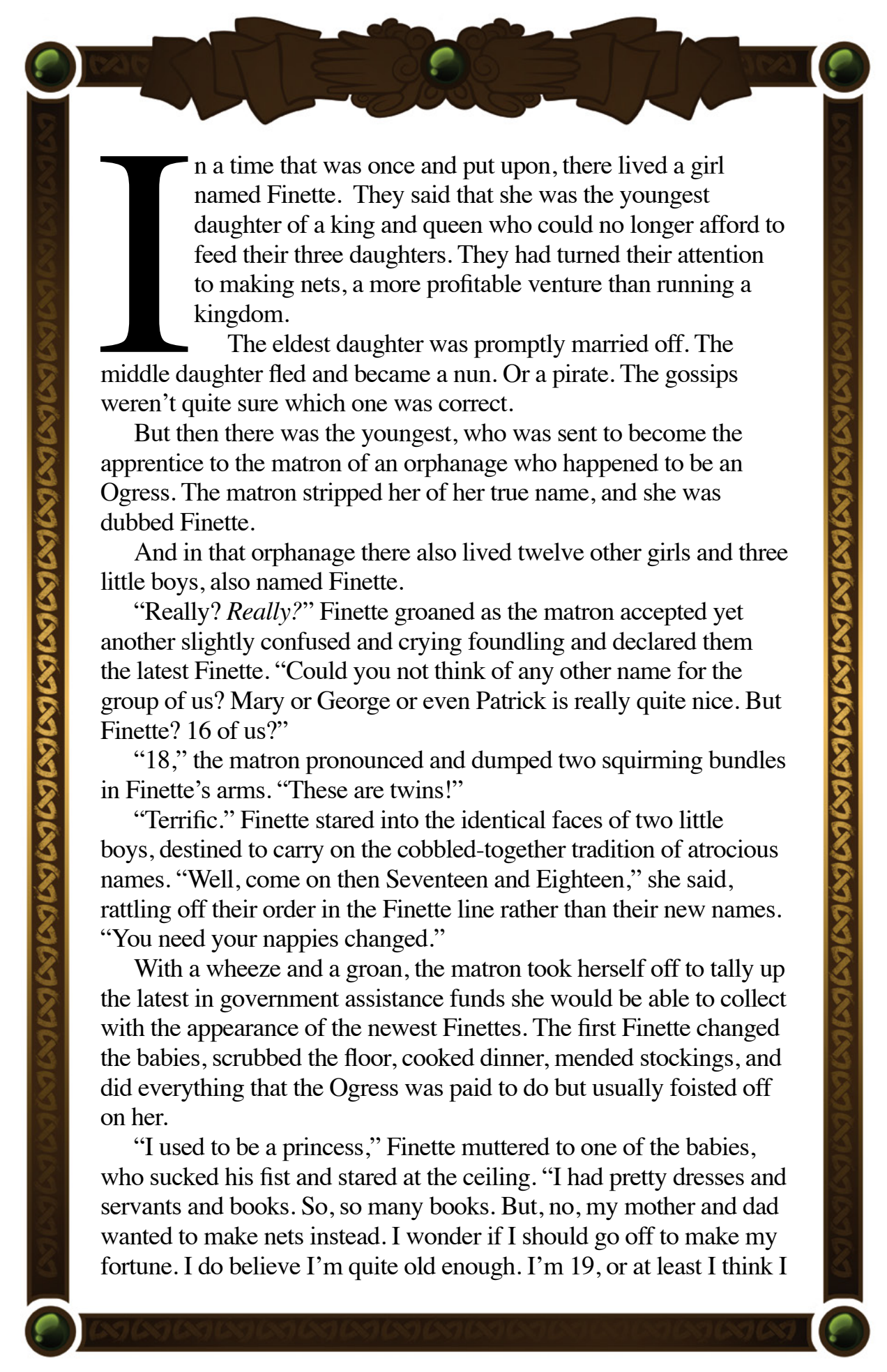
Well... for what it's worth

I'm really
glad that
you're you.

Finette



Story by Megan Lavey-Heaton | Art by Ran Brown



In a time that was once and put upon, there lived a girl named Finette. They said that she was the youngest daughter of a king and queen who could no longer afford to feed their three daughters. They had turned their attention to making nets, a more profitable venture than running a kingdom.

The eldest daughter was promptly married off. The middle daughter fled and became a nun. Or a pirate. The gossips weren't quite sure which one was correct.

But then there was the youngest, who was sent to become the apprentice to the matron of an orphanage who happened to be an Ogress. The matron stripped her of her true name, and she was dubbed Finette.

And in that orphanage there also lived twelve other girls and three little boys, also named Finette.

"Really? *Really?*" Finette groaned as the matron accepted yet another slightly confused and crying foundling and declared them the latest Finette. "Could you not think of any other name for the group of us? Mary or George or even Patrick is really quite nice. But Finette? 16 of us?"

"18," the matron pronounced and dumped two squirming bundles in Finette's arms. "These are twins!"

"Terrific." Finette stared into the identical faces of two little boys, destined to carry on the cobbled-together tradition of atrocious names. "Well, come on then Seventeen and Eighteen," she said, rattling off their order in the Finette line rather than their new names. "You need your nappies changed."

With a wheeze and a groan, the matron took herself off to tally up the latest in government assistance funds she would be able to collect with the appearance of the newest Finettes. The first Finette changed the babies, scrubbed the floor, cooked dinner, mended stockings, and did everything that the Ogress was paid to do but usually foisted off on her.

"I used to be a princess," Finette muttered to one of the babies, who sucked his fist and stared at the ceiling. "I had pretty dresses and servants and books. So, so many books. But, no, my mother and dad wanted to make nets instead. I wonder if I should go off to make my fortune. I do believe I'm quite old enough. I'm 19, or at least I think I

am. I can do anything I set my mind to. Isn't that right, Seventeen?" She quickly double-checked the note she pinned to the baby's nappy to tell him and his twin apart. "Yes. Seventeen."

It took Finette a few days to decide upon what fortune she wanted to seek. Money was nice. Fame didn't hold a lot of interest for her. Marriage wasn't something she wanted at all. She'd taken care of enough babies in her life, thank you very much, and didn't want any of her own. She had training to be a nursemaid or a serving girl, but surely there was something else she could aspire to since she was once a princess. Fortune hunting could not be undertaken at a moment's notice, she told Seventeen.

"I believe," she decided after a long day when it was nearly impossible to tell the other 17 Finettes apart, "I shall go in search of proper names for you all. You must have had them at one point."

So the day that the Ogress crafted new birth certificates for the twins, Finette convinced the second-oldest Finette to impersonate her. She kissed all the other children on their foreheads and told them she was off in search of a fairy godmother. She also took Seventeen with her.

"You know too much," she informed the little boy, contently asleep as she nestled him into a sling that would hold him close to her chest. "Why, they could make you talk. I know you're but a few months old, but I think Finette XIII knows just enough magic to be dangerous and I'm not taking any chances. I'll get you back to your brother soon enough, and you will have proper names."

On her way out, Finette stole the birth certificates the Ogress had created and the amount of coins that made up Seventeen's share of government assistance. And off she went to find her fairy godmother.

"I must have one somewhere," she told Seventeen that first night, as they camped out beside the road and the baby fussed for hours because he was teething. "I think it's a princess rule. There's a fairy godmother or a benefactor or a prince out there. I'm not that interested in princes. Or princesses. That means I have to rule a kingdom, and look how that turned out for my parents. No, I think I'll travel. Maybe I'll learn magic. I also make an incredible awesome pie. How about a traveling chef? You can be my apprentice, once you're old enough to hold a bowl and not fall into it."

Fortune hunting, Finette learned, was a very tedious chore.

Especially when you were toting a baby with you. But babies got you into places where poor, bedraggled girls usually couldn't go. Like squeezed into the last bit of space on a traveling coach. Or a bed of clean, soft rags in the corner of an inn's kitchen. People took pity on an infant and accepted the woman attached to it. This was something Finette was used to. No one paid attention to the person caring for the baby, rather the baby himself. And Seventeen was good-natured and didn't fuss much unless he was teething.

In the fifth town, Finette discovered the circuit judge would arrive within two days. She decided she didn't need a fairy godmother, rather she needed a court order. Court orders were pretty powerful, she informed Seventeen as she swept the kitchen of the inn where they stayed. She cleaned and baked in exchange for a tiny room under the stairs, and when she could, she consulted a baby name book she borrowed from a nearby church. She constructed a list of 17 perfectly respectable names and attached them to the false birth certificates the Ogress provided. On the second day, she bundled up Seventeen and went to visit the judge.

She sat through a murder trial, three custody hearings, and the public mocking of a mime. As the sun started to set, the judge finally agreed to hear her case. Straightening her frayed skirts, Finette approached the bench and told her story to the judge.

"And here is the list of names I created," she said, putting the stack of documents in front of her.

The judge frowned at the documents. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"I assure you, your honor, it is no joke."

"You told me you didn't want their names to be Finette."

"That is correct."

"Then why is Finette written 17 times?"

Finette snatched the certificates out of the judge's hands and gaped. Where there had been line after line of neatly written and perfectly respectable names the night before, all of them were replaced with the word "Finette" in her handwriting.

As Finette sputtered and the baby fussed, the judge ordered her from the courtroom. This involved being escorted out by two burly guards, because Finette was far too busy being shocked and begging the judge to hear her out to bother paying attention to the rules. When she and Seventeen found themselves left on the roadside, she grumbled and shoved the documents back in her satchel.



“We’ll find another judge,” she told Seventeen, “and try again.”

So Finette and Seventeen traveled to the next town and appealed to the judge there. Then to the mayor in another town and a priest in a third. Night after night, Finette wrote down 17 names for 17 orphans. Day after day, the names were replaced with Finette.

“Finette, Finette, Finette times infinity!” she cried as they were turned away again, perilously close to tears. She had gone through most of the funds she’d stolen from the Ogress, and word about the odd name-seeking girl and the baby she carried had spread about enough that finding work was impossible. “I am so sick of that name! I wish I’d never heard of it.”

In anger, she whirled around and hurled the birth certificates into a water trough. Instead of melting into a messy, inky blob, they floated on the surface of the dirty water. Finette stared at them, a

little dumbfounded. Carefully, she approached the trough and lifted a single certificate. She gave it a sharp shake, and the water rolled off it, leaving the certificate as dry and pristine as the day it was created.

“This is magic,” Finette cried and set out to prove it. She dumped an entire bottle of ink on the pile of certificates. She shoved them in a fire and left them in the road to be crushed by passing carriages. Every time, the certificates emerged looking like new.

So in the next town, Finette went to the local magic guild and made her case.

“These are indeed magic,” the guild leader informed her. “They are tied to the magical signature of each child. Ogress magic is very powerful indeed, and it is causing all of your attempts to change the children’s names to fail.”

“But why would the Ogress do that?” Finette asked.

“That I do not know. But I don’t have the power to change these names. If you find out, you could break the magic.”

So Finette and Seventeen started the long journey back to the orphanage. Long journeys are excellent for thinking, and Finette spent the days mulling over theories and working out reasons why the Ogress would give them all the same name. The day they reached their kingdom, instead of going to the orphanage, Finette found herself wandering to the tavern just down the road. She sat on a bench out front and wondered if it was even worth a try.

The door burst open, and the circuit judge that turned Finette away to begin with strode out. The judge halted the cluster of lawyers and clerks that followed her and turned to the girl. “It is you again, the girl of the made-up names.”

Finette scrambled off her bench, causing Seventeen to fuss. “They’re magic! The certificates are magic. It’s causing the list to change, I swear it. I had a magic guild prove it and everything. Why would an ogress want eighteen children named Finette?”

“Seventeen false Finettes,” the judge said, “and one true one.”

Finette blinked. “Me?”

“No.” The judge indicated the baby in Finette’s arm. “The boy.”

“Seventeen?” Finette stared into the baby’s face as he settled down. “He’s a true Finette?”

“Hand me the certificates.”

Finette handed them over, and the judge sorted through them, muttering an incantation under her breath. The certificates lifted into

the air and began to glow. All turned red except one, which changed to a bright green and floated into the tiny hands of the baby that Finette held.

“My sister,” the judge told Finette, “runs the magic guild you visited. She informed me of your case, and I agreed to take another look at it. There have been reports of children being abducted after a prophecy was made that a young prince or princess known as Finette would grant them immense power and weath. Your Ogress was in search of that true Finette. He is the heir to a vast kingdom in the north and was stolen from his cradle, along with his twin. But Ogres are not very intelligent and started stealing every baby they could get their hands on and hoped to get lucky. That’s why you were all named Finette. If the name was true, she would be able to tell with the birth certificates. Then she would eat the true Finette and absorb his magical signature, thus becoming the heir herself.”

Finette frowned and held the baby closer to her chest. “Then why didn’t she eat the rest of us?”

“You’re worth far more to her in government assistance than you ever were as food.”

“So how can we all get proper names?”

“You must break the Ogress’ magic. Once it’s broken, the certificates will be invalid, and I can give you all new names.”

Finette returned to the orphanage with Seventeen and quietly placed him in the cradle with Eighteen. They’d been gone for five weeks, but Finette II did such an excellent job as an impersonator that the Ogress never noticed. She resumed her normal life of cleaning and baking and changing nappies. Whenever she could, she sneaked to the library to research magic. What she found was a bit distasteful, but she had to do it. So Finette returned to the orphanage and started to bake. She baked and baked and baked until she used all of the government assistance money. And still she baked until the matron finally took notice and came down to the kitchen.

“You wasteful girl,” she yelled at Finette. “You have spent all our money for the month and the next three months after. How am I going to afford my bingo games? I should make you eat each and every one of these muffins.”

“But they’re your favorite,” Finette said sweetly.

The matron pursed her lips. “Indeed?”

“Won’t you have one?”

The matron took a muffin and ate it. Then she ate another and another. She ate so many that after awhile, she curled up beneath the table and fell into a deep sleep. As she slept, Finette brought the certificates to her and knelt by her side. She told the sleeping Ogress matron of her long journey, of discovering Seventeen's true heritage. She talked about the cookbook she found on how to eat babies and absorb their magical signatures. She also talked at length about the research she conducted on Ogre magic.

"I really have no desire to kill anyone, for I am not an Ogress," she informed the snoozing matron. "And I'm really not one for confrontation either. But as long as you affix your fingerprint to each of these letters I have drafted allowing the magic to be broken, all of us will be allowed to have true names."

So she took the Ogress' hand and inked the fingertips well. She pressed a finger to each of the seventeen letters she drafted, freeing each child from their loathed name. As she did, the birth certificate for each child shimmered and began to change. They became fragile paper once more, revealing the true name of each child. There were a couple of Marys, three Pattys, and a Julianna. The very last certificate to change was Finette's own. She sat on her heels and beheld the real name that her parents had given her. Then she quickly ushered the other children out of the house and left the sleeping matron behind for the authorities to arrest for governmental fraud.

The judge was waiting for Finette, along with duly appointed guardians to help find the other children homes. "You are an adult," she told Finette, "and can make your own way in the world. What will you do with your life?"

"I'm not sure," Finette replied. "But I do want to get the real Finette and his brother back to his parents. Then maybe I'll be a chef or a writer or a card shark. I can be anything I want."

"I see. And what was your true name, girl?"

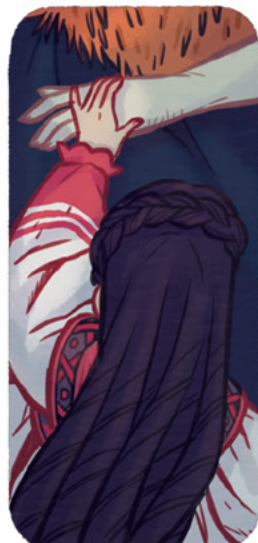
A smile tugged at the corner of Finette's lips. "Why, that's a secret. I'll tell the right person one day. But if I tell you now, then you will tell me I have to go rule a kingdom or marry a prince, and I really have no desire to do that."

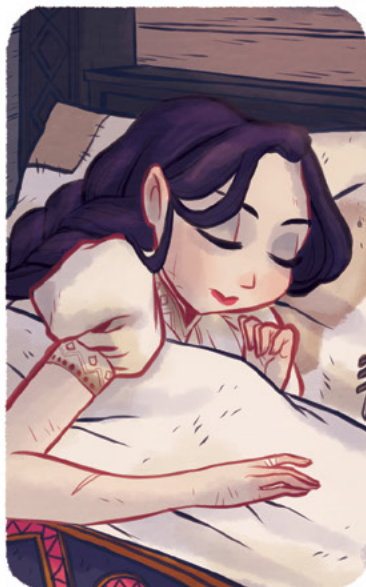
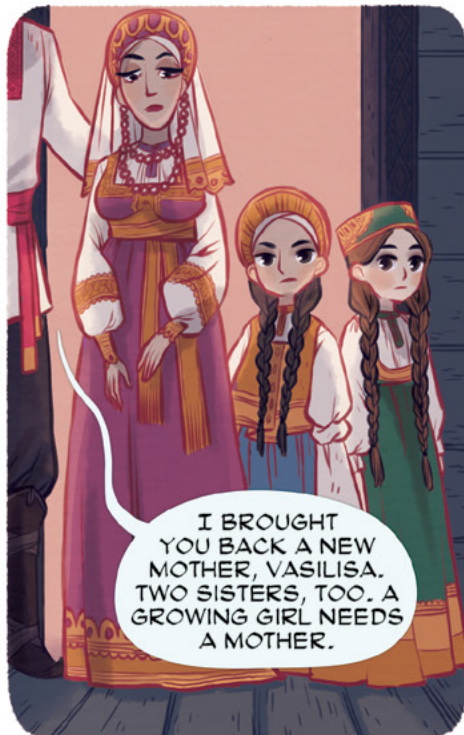
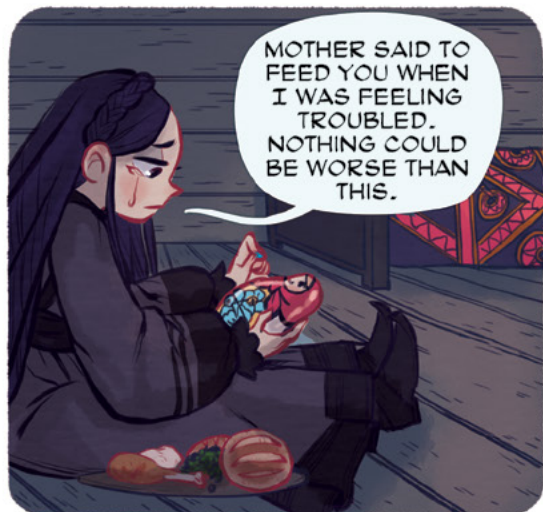
The judge shook her head. "Well, off you go then, in search for your happily ever after."

"Happily ever afters are for princesses," Finette declared and started down the road with the twin boys. "I'd rather be happy."



BY KADI FEDORUK





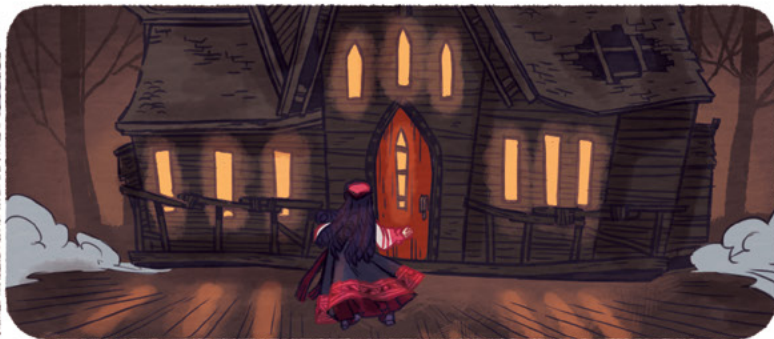




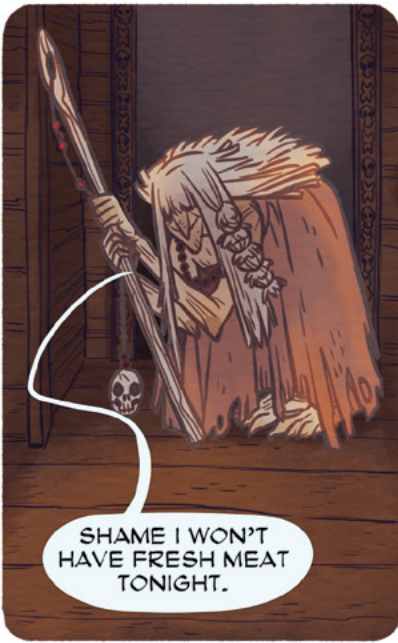




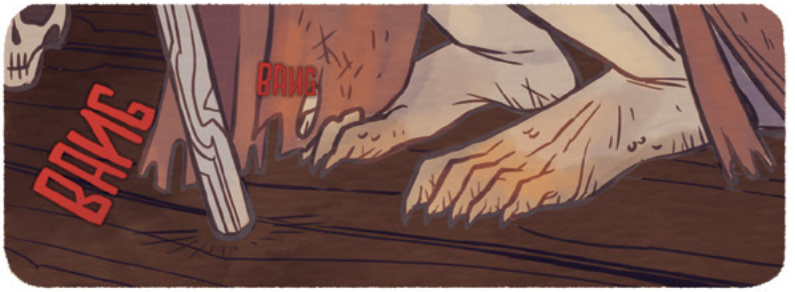








SHAME I WON'T
HAVE FRESH MEAT
TONIGHT.



TAKE THE WHEAT
AND GRIND IT.



DO YOU HAVE
ANY QUESTIONS,
CHILD?



...YES.



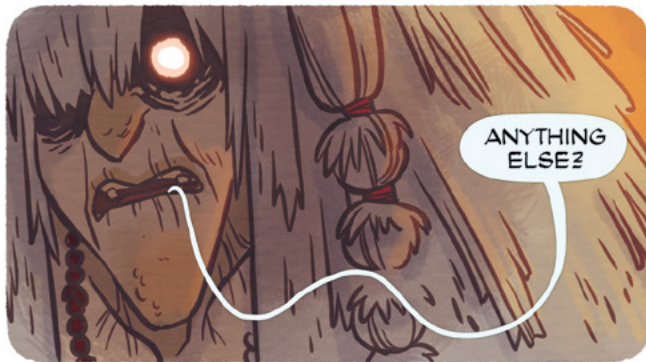
WHO WERE
THOSE RIDERS
I PASSED?



HMM, THE RIDERS?



THE WHITE RIDER,
MY DAY. THE RED RIDER,
MY SUN. THE BLACK
RIDER, MY NIGHT.



ANYTHING ELSE?



VASILISA, NO. DON'T ASK *HER* ANYTHING ELSE, JUST GO HOME WITH YOUR BOON.



WELL...



NO?



THEN I HAVE A QUESTION. HOW DID YOU COMPLETE MY IMPOSSIBLE TASKS?

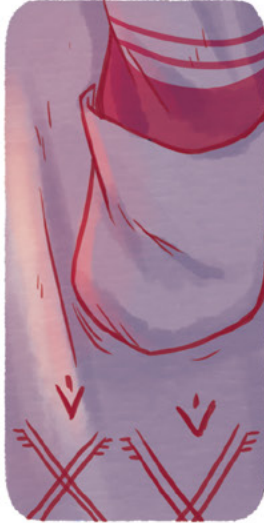
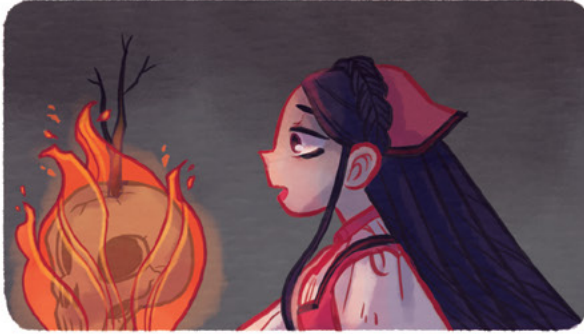
BY... MY MOTHER'S GIFT AND BLESSING.



I DON'T NEED A BLESSED CHILD. MORE TROUBLE THAN THEY'RE WORTH.



TAKE THE LIGHT YOU'VE EARNED AND LEAVE.









Valor would not be possible without our family, friends, and the support from the following people who backed our Kickstarter in 2014.

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a k sarah
A loyal fan
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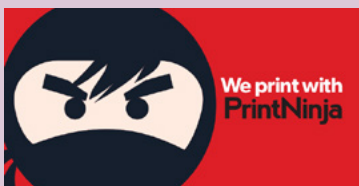
In addition to our amazing Kickstarter backers, we received immense help from the following:



SARAH STERN stepped in as our proofreader/copy editor and has been an immense help to everyone in the anthology. She is a writer and artist from New York, and has carefully proofread every story in this book. If anything is wrong, it is entirely her fault. (Editors' note: No, it's not)



HIVEWORKS is a creator-owned digital publisher and studio that provided advertising and moral support. A number of the creators in the anthology are in Hiveworks and the financial support gained from it helped them to work on Valor. Thanks for all the help, Jojo!



PRINT NINJA is our printer. The project is getting a free overrun that is being used to send Valor to libraries and schools. Thank you!

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Carol J. Guess	Chloe Nguyen	Cody Logan	D.W.	David Lawrence
Carol Pence	Chloe Prosser	Coleman bland	D.W.K. Crow	David Michaels
Carolyn Raufer	Chris	Colin J. Logue	Dai Thompson	David Peter
Carolyn Reid	Chris	Colin Keizer	Daisy Calvert	David Raynaud
Carolynn Hoople	Chris and Arianna	Colin Stuart	daiyi	David Sebastián
Carolynne Beede	Chris Booker	Colleen Kao	Dan Arrabal	David Silberstein
Carrie H.	Chris Demars	Columbia Gg	Dan Delaney	Dawn Chester
Carrie Hausman	Chris Denchfield	Connie Chinn	Dan Eyer	Dawn Oshima
Carver Rapp	Chris Keller	Connie G.	Dan Pollack	Dawnius
Casey Johnson	Chris L'Etoile	Connor "The Roach"	Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen	Dax Wain
Casey M.	Chris Naz	Richards	Dana Fujita	Dayna Broder
Cassandra Alvarez	Chris Olsen	Connor	Dana Rae	DC
Cassandra Feely	Chris Oney	Bartholomew	Dane and Jessica	DC Fleming
Cassandra Paris	Chris Quinn	Contractor	Salter	DCLawrenceUK
Cassandra S.	Chris W	Cora & Avery	Danea Sears	Deanna Schiffman
Cassidy Percoco	Chrissy Baldwin	Sedenka	Danella I. Regis	Debbie & Becka Both
Cassie "Artsykiwi"	Chrissy Colli	Cora Anderson	Dani Marie Kice	Debbie Barr
Pruitt	Christa Dippel/Rivas	Coral Snowdeal	Dani McCade	Debbie Chen
Cassie "The Egyptian" Lord	Christany Edwards	Cordell Finnson	Daniel "Shinji" Smith	Debi May
Cassie A.	Christen Higgins	Corey Self	Daniel B. Taylor	Deborah J. Brannon
Cassy Shaw	Christian Martin	Corey T Kump	Daniel Carlyon	Deborah Low
Castle K	Christian Melançon	Corian Grey Delaney	Daniel Kauwe	Deborah Mary Blackman
Cat B.	Christie Anne	Corinna Cornett	Daniel Kirrene	Deborah Robinson
Cat Bascle	Christie R. Fremon	Corinna Vigier	Daniel Lin	DeeDee McCaughan
Cat Leja	Christie S.	corny	Daniel Maberry	Dein Dehouwer
Cat Murphy	Christina 'VooDoo'	Cory Hanson	Daniel McNamara	Delisa E. Shepherd
Cat Pauley	Christina Bartell	Cory Louder	Daniel Monza	Demming Norder
Cat Seaton	Christina Elliott!!	Cory Olesen	Daniel Romascano	Denai Edwards
Cat Young	Christina K	Cory Sherman	Daniel Serbicki	Denise Pirkko
Catberks	Christina Major	CosmicBiscuit	Daniel Yokomizo	Denise, Kyle, Zoey & Paget
Catharin Meadors	Christina Retalliau	Courtland	Daniela	Derek Guder
Catherine	Christine Bertz	Eppelsheimer	Daniela Diaz Alonso	Derek Lynch
Catherine Braiding	Christine Hipp	Courtney Godbey	Daniela Margolis	Derek Song
Catherine Crooks	Christine L	Courtney Gonzalez	Danielle Bates	Derrick Battle
Cathy Caulfield	Christine Osborne	Courtney Hahn	Danielle Costello	Desiree Watson
Cátia Moreira	Christopher	Courtney Wallace	Danielle Edwards	Devan
Catie Coleman	Birnbaum	Courtney Yu	Danielle Keller	Devin Jessup
Catriona Mair	Christopher C.	Courtny Fenrich	Danielle Lyn	Devin McKernan
Beamish	Cockrell	Craig E. Petko	Danielle Tu	Dexter Castillo
Cecilia and Naia	Christopher Krietz	Craig Hackl	Danielle Velez	DGchans
Williams	Christopher Mangum	Craven	Daninn James	Dian Garrett and family
Cecilia Palomo	Christopher Teo	Cristi 'Morgan'	Zimmerman	Diana Gurfein
Cecillie Lundsgaard	Christy Morgan	Simila	Danita Rambo	Diana Huh
Cee and the Hellmouth	Christykins Norton and Teddy Bear	CrowFeatherWolf	Danny Baggett	Diana Lilwashu
		Cryssi	Daphne Friedman	
		Crystal F		

Diana Paprotny	Elizabeth Davidson	Emma Lord	Masson	Gabriel Morgan
Diana Sprinkle	Elizabeth Friend	Emma M	Eva Fournier	Gabriella Shigeta
Diane E.	Elizabeth Hamilton	Emma Rose Pringle	Eva Newbold	Gabrielle Simmons
Diantris	Elizabeth K	Emma Schroeder	Eva Schiffer	Gabrielle Taylor
Digital Skitty	Elizabeth K-W	Emma Spady	Eva Vanthomme	Gail Crunkhorn
Diogo Baquini	Elizabeth Neal	Emma Sterling	Eva Yonas	Galactic Guinea Pigs
Dominic Quach	Elizabeth Parmeter	Emma W	Evalyn-Averis	Galena Ostipow
Dominique Giles	Elizabeth Patrician	Emmanuel François	McKinzie	Galia B.
Don Elson	Elizabeth Pau	Emmeline Pui Ling	Baumgartner	Gariabell Maa
Donald Hopkins	Elizabeth Potter	Dobson	Evan Behar	Garuda Illo
Donelle Gryphon	Elizabeth Salazar	Emmie Engqvist	Evan Leeder	Gary Gaines
Donovan Willett	Elizabeth Sherry	Ena Enriquez	Evan Sutter	Gary Phillips
Dooney	Elizabeth Smith	Enzel	Evan Windsor	Gemma Agar
Dooplighost	Elizabeth Walkes	Eoin T Wilmot	Evara Resvil	Gemma Caswell
Doreen Nguyen	Elizabeth Wambheim	Eric A Jackson &	Eve Bolt	Gene A.
Dorothy Ng	Elizabeth Williams	Emilia Agrafojo	Eve Greenwood	Gene Lee
Dorothy Tokar	Elizardo [F&M]	Eric A. Neish	Eve Trahan	Genevieve Alberti
Doug Atkinson	Valdez	Eric E. Torres	Evelyn Crouse	Genevieve Hammang
Doug!	Elle	Eric J. Zylstra	Evie Talbot	Genevieve Schmitt
Dr. Kpong T. Limson	Ellen Kaluza	Eric L.	Ewa Gawthrop	Genielsse Reyes
Draco	Ellen Salt	Eric Menge	Ewan O'Sullivan	Geoff
Drew Marie	Elletra Parnell	Eric O. Myre	F, Evie, Archie and J.	Geoff Munn
Drose	Ellie Hackney	Eric Sarrafian	F. A. Marti	Georganne Walters
Duncan A. Doherty	Elliot McCollum	Eric Webster	Fabienne	George Geddes
Duncan Baird	Ellipsis	Erica "Vulpin the	Faith Stuart Williams	George Rohac
dydbunnies	Ellis Lin	Ponyfox" Schmitt	Fallon Leaf	Georgeann Muntin
Dylan	Eloisa Marie	Erica Canfield	Fantom Comics	Georgene Volintine
"DRAGON	Rodriguez (A True	Erica Duguid	Fatima Ahad	Georgia Frost
BORN" Baggett	Child of the Sea)	Erica Loppnow	fawn!	Georgia Pollock
E Newbs	Elsch	Erica Pantel	Faye Bates	Gerald Campbell
E. A. Morrissey	Elsydeon	Erica Speegle	Fearful Symmetry	Gerry Cardinal III
E. Panzenboeck	Elyse	Erik & Dale Meyer-	feikoi	Gibbs Moore
Ebbie H	Em Higbee	Curley	Felicia Desjardins	Giles Armstrong
Eden Brunson	Em Huff	Erik Froment.	Felicia Hudson	Gillian Dawson
Edith Sarabia	em-j Rabbitwolf	Erik Singer	Ferunando	Gillian Kaplan
Edna Phong	Em's Mom	Erika Pursiainen	Fes Works	Gina Liu
Eduardo Redoschi	Emaline Burrow	Erika Sorensen	Feste	Gina M.
Edward Finos	EmelineBlack	Erin "Lunulata"	Finley S. Carter	Ginger
Edward Gibson	Emilia Hald	Smith	Finn McInnes Stokes	Gisela Peters
Edward Woodstock	Emilie Anderson-	Erin and Patrick	Fiona	Gisele J
Eileen McLain	Grégoire	Cahill	Fiona Erasmuson	Giulia Barder
Elaine "TriaElf9"	Emilord	Erin Beckmeyer	Fiona Lynn Zimmer	gobblidygook
Tipping	Emily 'Reoakee'	Erin Bradley	Flávia Studart	Godahl
Elaine d'Ete	Newell	Erin F Lynch	Flore Voltaire	Golden Beard's Team
Elan Carnahan	Emily Beauparlant	Erin Fahey	Floris van de Sande	Goose Girl
Elana Houde	Emily Buck	Erin Goyins	Flynn the Cat	Gordon Wyant
Eldanaï Melain	Emily C	Erin Harker	Fonzie Pants	gowardfor
Ele Jenkins	Emily C. Yolo	Erin Hewett	"For K,L,&R"	Grace and Nila
Elea Tiri	Emily Cannon	Erin Kacerovskis	Fran Stewart	Jacobson
Eleanor Powell	Emily Cheeseman	Erin Magill	France Trudel	Grace Anderson
Eleanor Stevens	Emily Elizabeth	Erin McGill	Frances Jernigan-	Grace Antonas
Eleanor Webb	Lewis	Erin Moffitt	Clayton	Grace Gorski
Elena Morgan	Emily Fetingis	Erin Ratelle	Francesca Dare	Granny Pauline
Elena Yi	Emily Hughes	Erin RiggsSmith	Francine Françoise	Greg "schmegs"
Eli Landro	Emily Jeanne Shults	Erin S. Mahony	Francis	Schwartz
Elijah Martinez	Emily K	Erin Subramanian	Francis Lecours	Greg Weir
Eliot Beer	Emily Marchese	Erin Thompson	Frank Reding	Gretchen
Elisa Sguanci	Emily Miller	Erma, Anjelica,	Frank, Corri, & the	Grizzly Bearon
Elisabeth Dufresne	Emily Nemes	Francisco	Monkey Crew	guardian J
Elisabeth Keene	Emily Norry	Talamante +	Franny Jay	Gwen Phifer
Elisabeth Potsch	Emily Ott	Celeste Garcia	Fred Hirsch	Gwendolynn
Elise Vézina-Easey	Emily Parkerson	Esca Jensen	Frída Staksberg	Amsbury
Elise Wall	Emily Payne	esmereldes	(Sorck)	H. Rasmussen
Elissa Leach!	Emily R.	Essi Nopanen	Fumiki Nuss	Hadspen Blood
Elissa Sussman	Emily S. Cavalier	Essie Bee	G. J. Woods	Hakkaeni
Eliza Bowen	Emily Thomas	Estelle Hocquet	G. Natt Raines	Halee M. Smith
Elizabeth Adams	Emily Yang	Esther Kim	G.L. Day	Haley Hein
Elizabeth Baker	Emma Cae	Esther Lim	G.L. Morrison	Haley Lynn Jo
Elizabeth Cole	Emma Keefer	Ethelial Snow	Gabe Phayt	Haley Parish
Elizabeth D. Cantu	Emma Levine	Etienne Campion	Gabi	Haley Reeve

Hange	Hope Henry-Chapin	Jacob Fisher	JEB	Jessica B
Hanna Biedron	Hope Nicholson	Jacob McClenny	Jeff "JJ" Peterson	Jessica Benefiel
Hanna Paquette	HOWGIRLS	Jacob Randolph	Jeff Bird	Jessica Berry
Hanna Pettersson	DOSPACE.COM	Jacob Wisner	Jeffery Lawler	Jessica Blackshaw
Hannah B	I Morel	Jacqueline M.	Jelena Vukcevic	Jessica Cantlope
Hannah Beth Doney	Ian Connor	Hanchar	Jemma Hill	Jessica Dawson
Hannah Carver	Ian McFarlin	Jacsebalon	Jen Barr	Jessica Ferreira
Hannah D	Iarna	Jada	Jen Coster	Jessica Fischer
Hannah Fattor	Icka! M. Chif	Jade F Lee	Jen Edwards	Jessica G.
Hannah Ferrara	Iggy Koopa	Jade Harley	Jen Hickman	Jessica L.M. Taylor
Hannah Haverkamp	Ignatius Montenegro	Jade JM	Jen M	Jessica Lynn
Hannah J. Merchant	ILANA GALLARDO	Jade Stewart	Jen Maccioli	Engelbrecht
Hannah	Ilhja	Jadine Lannon	Jen McGuire	Jessica Pacitto
Karahkwenhawe	Ilka	Jaime C.	Jen Memmolo	Jessica Schulze
Stacey	Imani J Dean	Jaime Wurth	Jen Sheer	Jessica Scott
Hannah King	ImFarias	Jaimes	Jen Treese	Jessica Sirkin
Hannah Schofield	Imogen Pruthi	James "Ven" Tatsu"	JenMon	Jessica Stein
Hannah Sloane	Indigo Pohlman	Morgan	Jenn & Rose	Jessica Vanderpol
Hannah Taylor	Ine	James Andrew Joyce	Jenn Duncan	Jessicca Moore
Hannah Thoo	Irene Carolyn Shaw	James C Holder	Jenn Wang	Jessie Crossman
Hannah Walker	Ironbite	James D'Amato	Jenna	Jessie EP Sun!
Happy Bunny	Isaac Zerkle	James E Fallance	Jenna Carlson	Jessie H.
Harald Demler	Isabel Baker	James Fletcher	Jenna Stoeber	JeweledNightingale
Harry S	Isabel Ryuu	James Grasselli	Jenna Zamie	Jeydenise M.C. &
Hartchamber	Isabell Biggs	James Gray	Jennie Hazen	Angel M.V
Hassan Habib Lopez	Isabella Blaine-	James H. Murphy Jr.	Jennifer	Jherik
Hassana Oyibo	Longo	James Olson	Jennifer A Spear	Jialing Pan
Hatuli	Isabelle Potier	James Powers V	Jennifer Beale Cox	Jill Hughes
Havard	Isadora Tang	James Purves	Jennifer Berk	Jill McKinney
Sommervoll	Isaiah Smalley	James Riddell	Jennifer Brooks	Jillianne Brown
Hayley Sandersen	Isobel Wright	James Schell	Jennifer Cogar	Jim Arthurs and
Hayley Smith	Istalir Aumer	James Wilson	Jennifer Dutton	Crystal McDowell
Hazel	Iván de Neymet	JamesH	Jennifer Ferragut	Jim Coniglio
Heather & David	Franco	Jamie Kinasian	Jennifer Garnet Filo	JJ
Heather & Sarah	Ivan P.	Jamie Mayer	Jennifer K. Koons	JJ Gavin-Prystupa
Silver	Ivan Velkovsky	Jamie Winters	Jennifer L. Hykes	Jo PM
Heather A. Teel	Ivy Beth Gladstone	Jamieson	Jennifer M. Riddle	Joachim
Heather and Kay	Ivy Hang	Jaminx	Jennifer Monsen	Joanna Bendle
McCallum	Izzy Mumm	Jan Meiners	Jennifer Pease	Joanna Claire
Heather B	J A Pickford	Jana Hoffmann	Jennifer Ryan	Ormond
Heather Coates	J A Wilde	Janalee	Jennifer Thomas	Joanna Shingler
Heather E. Pristash	J Cope	Jane Mayhew	Jennifer Thurmond	Joanna Stegena
Heather Hintze	J Dungca & K Riehle	JaNeal M. Bartlett	Jennifer Weber	Jocelyn Fenton
Heather Hofshi	J Pharo	Janell Biczak	Jennifer Wilson	Jocelyn Lopez
Heather L Telfer	J Scott Knell	Janelle Ludowise	Jennifer Z.	Jocelyn Oudesluis
Heather Maddigan	J Sprague	Janerl	Jennifer Zyren Smith	Jocelyn Thresher
Heather Meadows	J. "Pedes" Piechowiak	Janessa Ravenwood	Jenny (usagi)	Jodi Goodin
Heather Reid-Murray	J. Faddis	Janice Lee	Krishnan	Jodiann
& Mike Murray	J. Godfrey	Janine Lisa Amberger	Jenny Appleby	Jodietron
Heather Shanahan	J. Kelly	Janine Pham	Jenny Couture	Joe Fusion
Heather Swanston	J. Kenneth Riviere	Janna Kang	Jenny McKeon	Joe Lewis
Hector R Cerda Dyer	J. Patrick Walker	Jannika M	Jenny Wheeler	Joe Penney
Heidi A. Wilde	J. Perkins	Jarrod C.	Jenny!	Joel G. "Monkey"
Helen McNamara	J. Quincy Sperber	Jasmin Malik Chua	Jens Bejer Pedersen	Joel Q
Helen Owen	J.A. Lauritzen	Jason "Muscadine"	Jeremie Lariviere	Johanna Solomon
Helia	J.J. Irwin	Crockett	Jeremy Gwinner	Johannes Krampf
Henrik Lindhe	J.L. Kimes	Jason F. Broadley	Jerome Liao	Johannes Luber
Hilda Serine	J.M. Cowan	Jason Leisemann	Jerri Anne Kallam	John 'johnkzin' Rudd
Hillary Froemel	J.M. Frey	Jay Lofstead	Jerusha Wilson	John & Stacy
Hitsugi Amachi	J.Pawlik	Jayne Dale	Jesi Evans	John Cowdery
Hnubcig Yang	jollyolly	Mallindine	Jess Idres	John Deemer
Hoh Yi Hui	Jac Engelbrecht	jc	Jess Speir	John F. Martin
Holly & Graham	Jacinta Molloy	JD Calderon	Jessamine V.	John J Ostrosky Jr
Holly & Jeremy	Jack Vivace	Jean Harrison	Jessanne Sheppard	John Komala
Holly Booth	Jackal Hollis	Jean-Philippe J	Jesse Jones	John L. Gehron
Holly Caddick	Jackie Abasolo a.k.a.	Jeanette Aprato	Jesse Taylor	John MacLeod
Holly Davis	"flowermiko"	Jeanette Frost-Ramos	Jesse Whyte	John Rogers
Holly E. Atterbury	Jackie McGarigle	Jeanne	Jessica	John S. Troutman
Hollz	Jackie Sherman	Jeannie Hisson	Jessica - Nef	John Sanchez
Hope Anderson	Jaclyn Gomez	JeannieMarie DeMito	Jessica Alice	John Wesley Gordon

Johnahthon Skloss	Juliana Holzhauer-	Kate	Kayla Kidwell-Snider	(proud mother of
Johnna Clark	Barrie	Kate Ashwin	Kayla Witherow	Fiona Towle, the
Johnna-Claire	Julie & Lily Stevens	Kate Baker	Kaylee Hays	Viking-in-Training)
Joleen White	Julie Dillon	Kate Flanagan	Kaylen R. J. Hughes	Kinaheso
Jolene Follgard	Julie Lerche	Kate Land and Chris	kayoche	Kira H.
Jon	Julie Levy	Hutten-Czapski	Kaze	Kira Parker
Jon Fetter-Degges	Julie Trenkle	Kate Naylor	Keely D.	Kirk Becker
Jon G.	Julie Vining & Colleen	Kate Nelson	Keidy Zuniga	Kirra Thornton
Jon Stout (www.	Ottomano	Kate North	Keiralee B.	Kirsten Lovstrom
jonstout.net)	Juliet Critchlow	Kate Putnam	Keisha Luhrsen	Kirsten Uhde
Jon Wratten	Jun & Sevi	Kate Szollosy	Keith Andersen	Kirsty Pemberton
Jonas Humphrey	Junelle Ward	Katelin Matthews	Keith Bissett	Kisai Yuki
Jonas Richter	Justin Kalinay	Katelyn Canez	Kel Lore	Kit
Jonathan "@	Justin Proffitt	Katelyn Cranmer	Kell Willsen	Kit Seaton
TAComix" Davis	Justine Creature	Katerang*Reynolds	Kelley Jabr	Kitsune Heart
Jonathan	Justine Glass	Katharina Gerlach	Kelli Fisher	Kitty Hatfield
"Chessboard	K & T	Katherine Angie	Kellie Ramirez	Kitty Williams
Man" Barrett	K. C. Waddingham	Figuroa	Kelly	Kiyara Moore
Jonathan Foulkes	K. E. Matthews	Katherine Berhow	Kelly Breswick	Klara Leander
Jonathan H. Liu	K. E. Muenz	Katherine Brown	Kelly Delahanty	Knight Porter
Jonathan Hepburn	K. Lau	Katherine Carr	Kelly Gardiner	Kniteando
Jonathan Shaver	K. McElligott	Katherine	Kelly Griffith	Korina Skye
Jonathan Shepherd	K.C.	Donaldson	Kelly Lexa	Kris Nielson
Jonathan Singer	K.H. Mercury	Katherine Fawcett	Kelly Stacy	Kris Roland
Jonathan W.	K.J. Rollins	Katherine H.	Kelly Thompson	Krishna Pterofractal
Jordan L. & Katie S.	K.S. Chasteen	Katherine Hempel	Kelly Weeren	Sivaranjan
Jordan LeAnn	Kailey Slaney	Katherine Kirby	Kelly Ziemski	Krista
Jordan Thompson	Kaerien	Katherine Long	Kelsey Anita Smith	Krista Barwick
Jordan, Fatima, and	Kaeti Vandorn	Katherine Malloy	Kelsey Avril	Krista Foerster
Elliot	Kaija Harrison	Katherine Randall	Kelsey Liggett	Krista Majewski
Jorden Varjassy	Kailani	Katherine S	Kelsey Rousseau	Kristen "Xekstrin"
Jörg Tremme	Kaitlin Callahan	Katherine Sugrue	Kelsey Werner	Perez
Jorja Hung	Kaitlin Grignon	Katherine Thornock	Kelseyica	Kristen Bernabe
joceline fenton	Kaitlin Saxton	Katherine Yap	Ken Catino	Kristen Harvey
Josefina Hörberg	Kaitlyn Spangler	Katheryne Newman	Ken Duarte	Kristen Ho
Joseph Civin	Kaitlyn Brady	Kathleen	Kendra Rasmussen	Kristen Keck
Joseph D. Compton	Kaitlynn Schultz	Kathleen Amy	Kennet Klokseth	Kristie Strum
Joseph Randall	Kali Van Nimwegen	Bradford	Pedersen	Kristin Hamilton
Joseph Stillwell	Kamala Codrington-	Kathleen Foley	Kenneth A Graves	Kristin Maun
Josh	White	Kathleen Kennedy	Kent Falconer	Kristina "Krispy"
Josh and Kelsey	Kana	Kathleen Moyer	Keri A	Peters
Rogers	Kara Bell-Brey	Kathleen Myers	Keri Bas	Kristina Eiberg
Josh L.	Kara Prior	Kathrine Yamamoto	Kerrie Manning	Kristina Rodriguez
Josh More	Karen	Kathryn Albert	Kerry Rae Morris	Kristina Viggers
Josh Vann	Karen Gunter	Kathryn Awesome	Kevan Mills - t.I.K.i	Kristine Herr
Joshua Munro	Karen Luk	Kathryn Bernard	Kevin D. Bond	Kristine Macasieb
Joy Milligan	Karen T	Kathryn Coyne	Kevin Julien	Kristjan Wager
Joy Trujillo	Karen Y.	Kathryn Johnson	Kevin Monkhouse	Kristy Bourgeois
Joy Vileniškis	Kari H.	Kathy Falgout	Kevin Nguyen/	Krystal
Joyce Ann "inkgizmo"	Karin Lundberg	Katie Bigham	Draiken Talkos	Krystal Williamson
Martin	Karin Woodyard	Katie Cannon	Kevin Tjen	Krysten Mawson
Joyce Barbarich	Karina Masabanda	Katie Cunico	Kevin Wong	Ksenia Winnicki
Joyce-Lynn Larocque	Karine Charlebois	Katie Dean	Kezia Tubbs	kts2008
JT Hughes	Karo Myllymäki	Katie Griffith	(TheKingKez)	Kurt Collins
Judith Owens	Karon Keeney	Katie McCamey	Khi Kismet	Kyla Blythe-Prahl
Judy M. Brenner	Kasey Van Hise	Katie McGuire	Kiandra and Arwyn	Kyle Armstrong
Judy Powers Murray	Kasia Medyna	Katie McMahon	Brazeau	Kyle Elizabeth Huck
judythevuvu	Kassandra and	Katie O'Meara	Kika Green	Kyle Lenz
Jules Y	Karsten Dulgov	Katie O'Neill	Killian Nelson	Kyle Rudy
Julia and James Ford	Kassandra Der	Katie Pearson-	Kim Dufur	Kyle Simons
Julia B. Campbell	Kat Kan	Wenger	Kim Grimaldi	Kyle Z. VanCourt
Julia B. Ellingboe	Kat Knudson	Katie Randall	Kim Szurnicki	Kylea Kmiecik
Julia Besserman	Kat Martine-McEvoy	Katie White	Kim Wincen	Kyoul
Julia Christianson	Kat Murphy	Katrina	Kimber Hawes	Kyrstin Avello
Julia Francis	Kat Pillman	Katt M	Kimberley & Luc	L
Julia G. Cowell	Kat Rowedder	Katy	Kimberly and	L-M Jakobsen
Julia Planes	Kat Spencer	Katy Lawson	Michael Lehman	L. Ann Ahlstrom
Julia Summer	Kata Kane & Ashley	Kay Shook	Kimberly Maughan	L. Liu
Williams	Altars	Kaycie D.	Kimberly Pugh	L. Mann
Julia Vrtilek	Katalina Vallez		Kimberly Towle	L.A. Christensen

L.C.	Leah Webber	Louis Kläy	Malcolm Lee	Marsena Ewing
L.Modesto	Leah Weir	Louise Anjou	Malloc	Marten van der Leij
LA Carlson	Lee Barker	Louise Williams	Mallorie Luna	Martha Reeve
La petite fille	Lee Onysko	LTCool	Mallory Ely	Martin and Marie
La'Sheema Babbs	Lee Rawles	Lucienne Brown,	Man Manto	Neubert
Lace Lancaster	Lee W.	Ariel and Sierra	Mandy Pederson	Marty Chodorek
Lacey Van Nortwick	Leigh	Brown	Manette	Marty Martin
Laia FarrÉ Jiménez	Relia 'Nikki' Pittman	Lucy Christie	Manuel A. Vanegas	Mary
Laine L Ratsep	Lena Sawin	Lucy Rose	Mara Emmons	Mary Caldera
Lamson Nguyen	Leniad Kaznor	Muntersbjorn	Mara Gebert	Mary Catherine
Lan Wang	Lennie Olsen	Luke Eperthener	Maralys	O'Leary
Lance Bradford,	Leonardo "El Leon"	Luna De Sangre	Maranda Morris	Mary E Berson
Space Detective	Fonseca	Lydia Au	Marat Sverdlov	Mary Rebecca Farris
Langdon Franz	Lesen	Lydia Hall	Marc Ball	Mary Sperry
Lani Aung	Leshia-Aimée Doucet	Lydia M.	Marc Christie	Mary Ward
Lara Maria	Lesley S	Lydia Marlowe	Marc Schablewski	Marygrace Burns
Larissa Rüdiger	Leslie Doyle (Angel	Lydia Rogers	Marcelle "Em-nat"	Matt Harvey
Larry Wentzel	Creations)	Lyle Coleman	Natisin	Matt Kerre
Lau Mourão	Leslie Trautman and	Lyndsey N. Raney	Marcus John Gray	Matt McClure
Laura	Greg On	Lyrinoir	Maureen Nobre	Matt Sawyer
Laura	Leticia Rose	Lys Stokes	Marenka	Matt Spence
Laura B.	Zaragoza	Lyvia A Martinez	Margaret A. Maloney	Matt Tichenor
Laura Bennett	Lex Wilson	M	Margaret M. St. John	Matthew Bannock
Laura Humphreys	Lexi Corder	M Reed	Margherita	Matthew Bird
Laura Kertz	Lexi Sprague	M Walk	DiGregorio & Chris	Matthew Cassar
Laura Knight	Lexify	M. E. Gibbs	Legge	Matthew Connolly
Laura Lu	Ligia Serafim	M. E. Oswald	Margie Molnar	Matthew Cramer
Laura O	Lilly Moore	M. Hobson	Margot Atwell	Matthew Ellison
Laura Pearce	Lilly Quinn, Simon	M. M. Owen	Margot Koval	Matthew Finco
Laura R.	David, Natasha,	M. Sinclair	Marguerite Kenner	Matthew Gifford
Laura Sanchez-	and Jacob	M. Tadashi Havey	and Alasdair	Matthew Isom
Reverri	Germany	M. Yang	Stuart	Matthew Lind
Laura Schoenle	Lily Corina Culbreath	M'lissa Wetherell-	Maria	Matthew Petrak
Laura Snow	Lily Horne	Moore, Rowan &	Maria Blowers	Matthew Whitehead
Laura Tryon	Lilyheart	William	Maria José de Juan	Maud Benard
Laura, David, Lily,	Lilysea	Maarten Leo Daalder	Fraile	Maud V
and Maddy	Limtrot	Mabel Seyler	Mariana	Max Zelinka
Lauren "Wingéd Elf	Linda Orthner	Mackenzie Raup	Albuquerque	Maxime Roberge
Girl" Sparks	Lindsay Robertson	Mad Molly Wander	Marie Anello	Maxwell Heath
Lauren Blanchard	Lindsey Aldred	Maddalena	Marie Lupia	Maya Gadley
Lauren C.	Lindsey Fraser	Giovannini	Marie Viala	Maya O.
Lauren D.	Linnsey Nil	Maddie Allen	Marie-Christine	MDP
Lauren Davis	Lisa	Maddie Anderson	"Nawee" Bernier	Meagan
Lauren Elizabeth	Lisa	Maddie M Winograd	Mariel Holm	Meagan Huber
Lauren Fotiades	Lisa Polkosnik	Maddie Tong	Mariel Sorlien	Meaghan Healey
Lauren Gee Myers	Lisa Richelle Jensen	Maddy Young	Marietta G.	medras
Lauren Houser	Lisa Yandell	Madeleine Michaud	Marijke, Wyrd Queen	Meeghan C.
Lauren Kraus	Lissa Pattillo	Madeleine Price Ball	Marilic	Appleman
Lauren Maier	Liz Duong	Madeline and Anna	Marilyn Levinson	Meena Echo
Lauren Oh	Liz Ellis	Madeline Edmonds	Marin & Mal	Meg (Marie-Eve
Lauren Perry	Liz Olhsson	Madeline Little	Marina Mustieles	Guindon)
Lauren Scanlan	Liz Tolleson	Madeline Yost	Salvador	Meg Brown
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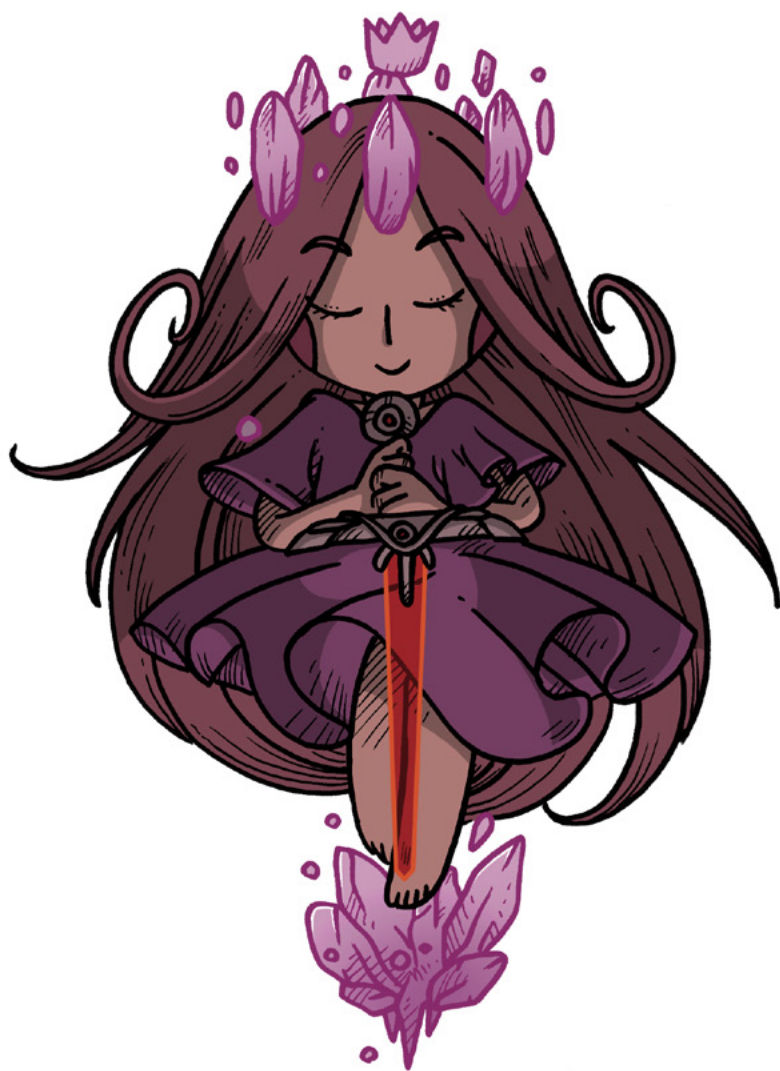
(aliceandthenightmare.com)

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